Repositioning diagnostic school reviews using appreciative inquiry: A way of eliciting student voice for school improvement

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Abstract

Concerned by the lack of student voice in strategic planning and school improvement processes within schools in general, secondary students from the Australian Science and Maths School (ASMS) were invited to participate in conversations about their lived experiences of schooling. Invariably, these conversations evoked affirming and critical discussions from the students in relation to their learning, school culture, dominant pedagogies and other arrangements. The research used techniques from an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) methodology which is underpinned by strength-based and affirmative philosophy and practices. Stories were gathered through semi-structured conversation that occurred in focus groups. The emergent themes became the basis of a discussion with senior leaders responsible for the strategic planning of the school.

A powerful emergent theme was co-constructed around a notion of freedom. The sense of freedom was found within experiences associated with the teacher-student relationship, decision-making, preferred pedagogies, negotiation of curriculum, movement within an open physical environment, and the students' sense of well-being. This powerful theme was subsequently presented to the ASMS Strategic Planning Leadership Committee (SPLC) to promote discussion amongst leadership in terms of generating new understandings about the 'life' within the school as this might be sustained and enhanced by the school's strategic planning agenda.

Keywords: *Student voice; Appreciative Inquiry; organisational development*

School reviews

Over the last 30 years, school reviews have increasingly been used by educational systems globally to ascertain school performance across a specified array of school performance indicators (Santiago et al., 2011). Their nature and purpose remain varied, reflecting national traditions, infrastructure and practices, broader educational policy and political agreements. Across Australia, there are various iterations and processes attached to school reviews (both external and internal) but all review processes are essentially similar in intent.

> With its federal constitution, Australia has a variety of forms of school evaluation in place, each of which derives from the particular circumstances and traditions of the state, territory and school sector within which it has developed. However, the principle of school evaluation, whether internal or external, together with expectations about planning and reporting, are established features of the educational landscape across Australia. (Santiago et al., 2011, p.100)

Reviews typically involve rigorous inquiry into a school's effectiveness and performance, with subsequent recommendations for school improvement. Predominantly school review processes pay attention to school enrolment trends, retention and attainment data, parent perceptions of schooling using surveys and interviews, classroom and whole school observations of teachers' pedagogical practice and investigations into financial and resource management considerations.

School reviews can involve an external review team of educators and educational officials who are situated outside the school. The school's performance involves the use of a variety of diagnostic measurement

tools.   In addition, a school is expected to initiate self-review processes in relation to curriculum, assessment, leadership, resourcing, financial processes, the transparency associated with government investment and the governance of the school.

School management are typically required to involve the school and its stakeholders in departmentally specified internal review processes that are then reported by the school Principal. In due course, the Principal is accountable to the local, regional and national Education departments for their performance outcomes, while also accepting responsibility for their school's improvement plan.

> School evaluation has the potential to help bring coherence to the wider agenda, provide the kind of formative evidence which can inform both policy and practice and improve traction at the point where formal learning is taking place. (Santiago et al., 2011, p. 114)

South Australian context

In the South Australian public education context, the Department for Education and Child Development (DECD) uses an accountability framework as the basis of these reviews (both internal and external) called the DECD Improvement and Accountability framework (DIAf) which is currently under review.

The DIAf framework has historically foregrounded how the external and internal review process should be managed, foregrounding mandated key dimensions of internal review inquiry integral to the DIAf internal review process called 'Self Review'.

> The DIAf is underpinned by the DECS Principles of Improvement and Effectiveness to support Self Review. These nine principles are based on a body of international research and informed by practice. (Government of South Australia, 2010, p. 1)

The key dimensions of the school review are listed as: (1) Focus on Learning, (2) Think Systemically, (3) Share Leadership, (4) Attend to Culture, (5) Listen and Respond, (6) Make Data Count, (7) Set Direction, (8) Target Resources and (9) Continuously Improve.

The research methodology used in the DIAf external and self-review processes is not clearly articulated. However, a critical reading of the methodology underpinning school review can be attributed to the methodologies promoted within the school improvement and effectiveness literature (MacBeath, 2010). This literature positions school reviews within positivist scientific methodologies that align with new public management theory and practice.

> According to Balacco (2010), the DECD DIAf processes apply the concept of a cycle of improvement.

> The processes encourage regions, schools and other educational sites to collect multiple measures of data to inquire into practice and performance as part of self review and performance reporting against standards. The findings are intended to inform plans, strategies and priorities as part of improvement planning and targeted actions for intervention and support. (Balacco, 2010, p. 1)

Like the DIAf, the drive for improvement in all schools has predominantly been initiated by educational policy makers situated across various levels of government. It usually takes a top-down, standards driven orientation that describes the educational outcomes all schools are expected to produce (Lezotte, 2005, p. 9). In recent years the accountability agenda appears to have escalated as a result of the intensification of new public management theory and practices. What is apparent is that publicly reported high profile data about schools have become a stalwart of most large scale reform efforts (Croxford, Grek & Shaik, 2009; Earl & Katz, 2006).

Evidence from countries in many different parts of the world leads to the same conclusion – schools that know themselves, that adopt a systematic and critical approach to evidence are schools that are able to take charge of change rather than be controlled by it. Self-evaluating schools are likely to be more effective and to

improve more rapidly than ones that rely on external sources to validate their quality (Stoll & Myers, 1997; Ouston &Davies, 1998; Rosenthal, 2001 in MacBeath, 2010).

What is taken for granted in the DIAf framework is its philosophical underpinnings. These underpinnings provide a positivist view of schooling effectiveness derived from assumed irrefutable and scientific evidence. From a positivist perspective, the review report offers factual, unbiased and objective renderings of schooling performance with associated ways to lift shortfalls in performance. The external review report is completed by 'outsiders' who carry images of best practice. These reports are often framed in 'what works', pragmatic recommendations and requirements. The report is written by reviewers who have an undisclosed view of what constitutes 'good' schooling practice.

Why position students in school review processes?

The school review process is predominantly adult focused. It would appear that the opportunity for engagement and the student's voice are seriously lacking, which is a concern given that the educational project was established for their formation and development. Students themselves are able to tell us what works in their experiences of schooling: what engages them; what is relevant and real (McFadden & Munns, 2002; Smyth & Hattam, 2002).

This is where appreciative inquiry can offer school communities and their leaders new ways to understand how their schooling improvement efforts are being experienced by their students. If students' voice is to be promoted in meaningful ways then a major paradigm shift in the conduct of school reviews is required. This would involve "giving up authoritarian ways of relating" but not "giving up authority or rigour" (Smyth, Down & McInerney, 2014, p. 21). Rather, rigour redefined in democratic schools '"works to involve students in school planning, the decision making process and all aspects of the curriculum – design, implementation, assessment, reporting and evaluation" (Smyth et al., 2014, p. 22).

Arguably, students are best positioned to inform and critique the learning programs of a school. Noyes (2005) argues that, since the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) ensured the rights of children to actively participate in all matters concerning them, there has been increased international attention to using students' perspectives to develop educational processes. The student voice movement is based on the premise that schools should reflect the democratic structures in society at large. Under this conception the school becomes a community of participants engaged in the common endeavour of learning (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004,) Unfortunately, student views about their lives in schools have received little attention in research, policy and practice debates (Smyth et al., 2014).

Method

This research project sought the views and experiences of young people about their schooling at the Australian Science and Maths School (ASMS).

Context

The ASMS (South Australia) is purpose-built on the campus of Flinders University, covering grades 10 to 12 and established to innovate mathematics and science education. Learning activities are inter-disciplinary, personalised, authentic and inquiry-based, linking science and mathematics to other areas of study including cutting–edge technologies like robotics and nano-technology, as well as to real world issues. The school has ICT-rich open flexible learning spaces for groups of different sizes, collaborative relationships between learners and teachers, and mixed aged tutor groups and support systems. The learners work with an individual learning plan and an electronic portfolio. The teachers work in teams, and there are extensive activities for professional development and co-operation. The school conducts action-based research to

improve its educational practice, and professional learning activities to share knowledge and materials with other practitioners. (Extract from 2013 OECD report, *Innovative Learning Environments,* pp. 201-202)

Research approach

In this research, we captured these insights using strength-based interview techniques from a research approach known as Appreciative Inquiry with three groups of young people at the ASMS.

Appreciative inquiry (AI) is a strengths-based approach developed by Cooperrider in the late 1980s as an alternative approach to traditional organizational development models. As an interpretive research approach, AI is underpinned by a social constructionist philosophy (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Gergen, 1999). This philosophy holds the view that the social world is created and constructed in dialogue through the stories we tell each other (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Gergen & Gergen, 2000; Howe, 2001; Merriam, 1998).

The AI research approach seeks positive elements of the social world in terms of what is working. The questions asked and the subsequent inquiry brings about change. As a change strategy, AI changes social systems by generating collective images of new and better futures through an exploration of the best current practices (Bushe, 1999). In the context of school review, AI offers an inquiry framework that focuses on the life-centric nature of experiences where students are enabled to disclose their lived experiences of schooling (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). The AI approach is designed to appreciatively inquire into the causes of life-centric moments as the basis of identifying emergent themes for future practice (Hammond, 1998).

Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) proposed four basic principles that underpin AI. They include the notion that the research begins with (1) appreciation, and it should be (2) applicable, (3) provocative, and the (4) process ought to be collaborative (Reed, Pearson, Douglas, Swinburne,& Wilding, 2002). The principles of AI are incorporated in a four-step or 4D framework (Cooperrider, Sorenson, Whitney & Yaegar, 2000; Giles & Kung, 2010; Hammond, 1998). Step 1 discovery, focuses on the need to describe experiences, which exemplify the best of "what has been" and "what is" in terms of the students' experience of schooling.

Since 1980, AI has been applied to aspects in the business world (Whitney, Trosten- Bloom & Rader, 2010; Reed et al., 2002), education (Giles & Alderson, 2008), organizational improvements in student affairs (Elleven, 2007), appreciative pedagogy (Yballe & O'Connor, 2000), and professional development systems (Goldberg, 2001).

Research questions

As researchers, we sought to apply techniques from AI in the context of student's experiences of their schooling. Our overarching research questions were:

1. What are the views and experiences of schooling at ASMS from a student's perspective?
2. How might students' experiences of school influence the school's strategic planning process?
3. How effective is the use of AI techniques in eliciting students' lived experiences for the purpose of a school review?

Within the AI interview process we were particularly interested in understanding student's experiences of schooling at ASMS and what these understandings bring to ASMS strategic planning. More specific questions included:

*   Why did you choose the ASMS school?
*   What were your first impressions of the school?
*   How has the learning environment and physical space worked for you?
*   What do you notice about schooling structures, culture and pedagogies within ASMS?
*   What aspects of schooling work for you?

- How is the school helping you with your future planning and directions?
- What words describe your ASMS experience?
- Based on your experiences of ASMS, what recommendations would you make for other schools, and;
- Based on your experiences of ASMS, what recommendations would you make for ASMS's improvement into the future?

Participants

In this research project there were seven students, three from year 12 (the final year of schooling), three from year 10 (the first year of schooling at ASMS) and one graduate. There was one female and six males. In addition to the students, the researchers presented the research themes to the ASMS Strategic Leadership team for their consideration. More than an affirmation of the labelling of themes, we sought a phenomenological nod in relation to the essence of the articulated themes presented. Further, this draft report was tabled with the Principal seeking her comment on our understandings of the student research data.

Interviews

The focus groups involved interviews of no more than ninety minutes. Students had the opportunity to write and also share their views in response to the questions. The interviews were conducted with an experienced staff member present, who also assisted in the data analysis. The presentation of key themes and the ensuing discussion with the Strategic Planning team went for one hour.

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed prior to a hermeneutic process which was replicated from phenomenological research previously undertaken (see Giles, 2008; Giles, Bills & Otero, 2015). The hermeneutic analysis involved an exploration of students' lived experiences of the school and the identification of emergent and powerful themes (van Manen, 1990).

Ethics approval

Ethical approval for this research inquiry was gained from the Faculty of Education, Humanities and Law Ethics Committee, Flinders University, South Australia.

Findings

Student themes

In this section, we outline the key emergent themes from the interviews with students. Each theme is supported by direct quotes from the students.

We describe the first theme as *"Freedom from"*. This theme relates to how students must attend to learning in their secondary schooling. It would appear that students notice a freedom from their previous experiences of dominant conventional secondary schooling. All ASMS students have been involved in education within other conventional secondary schools for at least years 8 and 9 prior to their enrolment at the ASMS. Students said;

> *After a visit, I felt the school environment was suitable for my learning.* (Year 12)

> *Freedom, I love maths and science. My friend went there and said it was great. My teachers ... recommended it.* (Year 10)

> *I made the decision to move to ASMS because I have had an interest in science and maths for*

a long time and a school with them as a focus sounded like a brilliant idea. I had also heard about the level of freedom the students have here, and as I always viewed myself as a self-directed learner, it sounded like a good place to study. (Year 10)

The second theme is described as *"Freedom to"*. It would appear that students have a sense of autonomy in pursuing deep learning. The students said;

*The 100 minute lessons go fast… always something to do… used to time out when teachers did all the talking. Interesting – lessons take less time than the 50 minute lessons in old school (here…100 minutes goes faster) – want to understand it all the time. Pracs… always previously very rushed… here… plenty of time to do things. (*Year 10)

Space promotes interaction… not distracted by other classes… freedom – stay in limits, don't disobey. Enough freedom… all open classrooms… free to ask for help… it makes you feel comfortable… talk to almost everyone… everybody knows everyone around. (Year 12)

No bells… 3 lessons a day… more time to do the work (inside and outside) of class… 100 minute sessions. (Year 10)

The third theme is described as *"Freedom to be"*. Students appear to sense a freedom to be 'who' they are, and express themselves in their learning community. We noticed in the interview process, students showing their individuality as respected and trusted young adults. They said:

Nice the fact we can call them (teachers) by their first name… same level… teacher not really the boss… make-up in other schools and wearing earrings was an issue. At my previous school I had to wear hoops or sleepers – Does it really matter in relation to learning? (Year 10)

See teachers as friends… more comfortable approaching them… casually talk to them… connectivity… still give respect… really easy to approach… don't get angry… don't rush things… talk freely… teachers as mentors. (Year 12)

As soon as I made friends here, I loved the school… that had not happened before… like-minded… science/maths… environment of the school (connectedness, relaxed, inviting)… you can be yourself… `weird kids here' in a nice way. (Year 12)

Teacher student relationships – the power relationship between teacher and student is much less so… much more friendly… between friends… respect. (former ASMS student)

…lot of people from different countries… everyone is connected… less racism. (Year 12s)

The fourth theme is described as *"Freedom to learn"*. While there is a plethora of literature around the theory of personalised learning, these students declared;

There are limits, don't disobey. Enough freedom… all open classrooms… free to ask for help… it makes you feel comfortable… can talk to almost everyone… everybody knows everyone around here. (Year 12)

One big family… atmosphere really good… almost no bullying here… tasks are more engaging interesting… lots of group work… know everyone… discussing with students around you… making meaning together. (Year 12)

Computers – we all have laptops (school is on WiFi)… computers all over the place… all technology… connection to everything… we use Twitter/Facebook… sharing the learning… U tube sources… other schools U tube is blocked – really annoying… being trusted – maturity. (Year 12)

Owning your own learning… collaboration with students and teachers more effective. (Year 12)

Open space gives self-directed learning… responsibility for your own learning… you're in charge. (Year 12)

Space promotes interaction… not distracted by other classes… (Year 12)
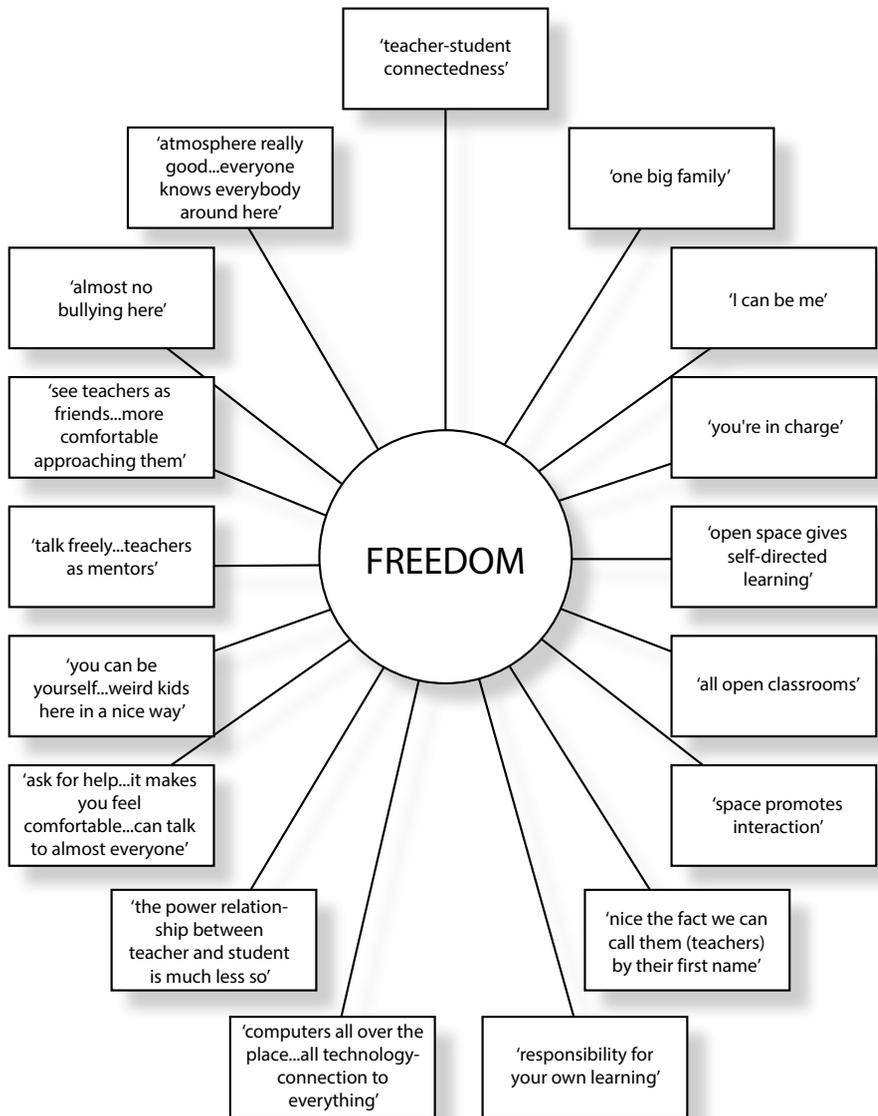

Figure 1. Dimensions of freedom articulated by the ASMS students

When students were asked to write down key words that describe their experiences of schooling at ASMS, they most frequently said, *'freedom'*, *'innovative'* and *'engaging'*.

- The year 10 students shared the following words in order: *freedom, positive, engaging, open (spaces), friendly, interesting, very different.*
- The year 12 students shared the following words in order: *challenging, abstract (way of learning), innovative, self-directed, collaboration, self-confidence, interactive, multi-cultural, welcoming, knowledge, encouragement, relational, teacher-student connectedness, encouraging, connections with each other, everyone helps.*
- The former ASMS student shared the following in order: *open space gives self-directed learning, responsibility for your own learning, you're in charge.*

A summary of the students' comments speaking to the theme of **'freedom'** is shown in Figure 1.

Reflections from the Strategic Leadership Team

The ASMS strategic leadership group were provided with a presentation of the student responses to the AI questions and were asked; 'Does the essence of `freedom' resonate with you and your sense of how students experience life in the ASMS?' A one hour conversation then ensued. They offered a resounding YES with some qualification. They described freedom as code for 'choice' which resonated with the ASMS philosophy of 'choose your own adventure' provided in their marketing materials.

> At the ASMS we embrace the diversity of learning, encourage students to be self-directed learners, and place great importance on collaborative learning for the entire ASMS community. Our students can shape their learning to best achieve their learning goals. Our teachers are supported to reflect and learn, to improve their capacity to deliver a leading-edge STEM curriculum using engaging pedagogy designed to suit the needs of each individual learner. We actively pursue partnerships with community and industry that best support our students to learn, and to achieve their post-school pathways. (ASMS Website, 2015)

They also discussed the positive influence of the open physical learning environment upon students' sense of freedom. They believed that the open space and what it allowed teachers and students to do was strongly represented in the students' responses to the questions. They discussed how the open physical space of the school (classrooms without walls) enhanced the teaching and learning culture of a 'welcoming' and 'connected' school learning community.

The Principal affirmed the link between student choice and the impact of the open learning environment upon this notion of choice. For the Principal, the open learning environment invoked a 'democratisation of the learning relations' which in her words 'can drive the sense of freedom'. From the Principal's perspective, 'the sense of freedom evoked in the research is the lived experience of students and staff at the ASMS'. The strategic leadership group viewed the student responses as an important affirmation of the open physical space and design of the ASMS and their current strategic directions; in particular their current work in progressing teacher action research exploring degrees of curricular co-design with the students.

Discussion

Embarking on an interpretive inquiry that required hermeneutic processes opened understandings that act as a lens into students' lived experiences of the schooling at ASMS. What was remarkable about the responses of the students we interviewed was their affirming recognition of a new 'schooling grammar' at work in the ASMS. They were articulating through their lived experiences of schooling that the more traditional

and conventional schooling ways of working which we as researchers understand as endemic to many conventional secondary schools no longer held sway at the ASMS. Working from experiential recounts and appreciative questions, the AI process revealed a set of holistic themes underpinned by the dominant notion of 'freedom.'

Freedom

The students interviewed in this research articulated various dimensions of this notion of 'freedom' in relation to their lived experiences of schooling at the ASMS.

ASMS Schooling design (freedom)

According to Tyack and Tobin (1994) the basic "grammar" of secondary schooling, like the shape of classrooms, has remained remarkably stable over the decades.

> By the 'grammar' of schooling we mean the regular structures and rules that organize the work of instruction. Here we have in mind, for example, standardized organizational practices in dividing time and space, classifying students and allocating them to classrooms, and splintering knowledge into "subjects". (Tyack & Tobin, 1994, p. 454)

The ASMS students were clearly saying they enjoyed the grammar of schooling at the ASMS in terms of its structures (open building design, no bells, longer lesson length), culture (supportive, more equal power relations, welcoming) and pedagogy (supported self-directed and negotiated personalised learning).

The ASMS schooling design offers students a strong sense of freedom to engage in learning in supportive ways that acknowledge who they are and how they best learn. Most importantly, the students' voices align with the school's public image of what they offer and how they offer it, its strategic plan and various marketing materials; essentially highlighting that the school's public rhetoric of itself is authentic and that its vision for the future strongly aligns with students' affirmations of how schooling should be.

ASMS Learning space (freedom)

Smyth and McInerney (2012), suggest that "space might be considered as 'integral (but as) yet unexamined and under-theorised component…of educational studies'." Indeed, "spaces are intimately related to the formation of biographies and social relationships". (Tilley, 1994, p. 11).

Students declared the 'space' which constituted the physical learning environment at the ASMS offered them a sense of freedom; 'freedom to be me', 'freedom from overt teacher power and control', 'freedom to learn in ways that work for me', 'freedom to explore and use technology', and a 'freedom to inquire deeply into learning interests'. Students' experiences also revealed that "space is a contested context for action in which 'structures of power and domination' (Tilley, 1994, p. 9) which featured as their previous experiences of schooling were re-configured into more equal power relationships at the ASMS".

ASMS Student voice (freedom)

Our sense of the student responses to our questions was that the leadership at the ASMS was demonstrating a strong commitment to student voice across the school.

Smyth (2006) argues that educational leaders show commitment to student voice by giving students significant ownership of their learning in other than tokenistic ways;

> …supporting teachers and schools in giving up some control and handing it over to students; fostering an environment in which people are treated with respect and trust rather than fear and threats of retribution; pursuing a curriculum that is relevant and that connects to young lives; endorsing forms of reporting and assessment that are authentic to learning; cultivating an atmosphere of care built around relationships; promoting flexible pedagogy

that understands the complexity of students' lives; and celebrating school cultures that are open to and welcoming of students' lives regardless of their problems or where they come from. (Smyth, 2006, p. 282)

These characteristics were evident in the students' experiential accounts of being in ASMS.

ASMS Sharing power (freedom)

According to Noyes (2005) there are distinctive philosophical underpinnings associated with how student voice features in schools. He cites notions of schooling purpose, power and control, affirming or deficit views of students as learners as key indicators of how schools position young people as learners. He offered the following school use of power continuum to illustrate the various manifestations of schooling beliefs and how these beliefs position young people as learners (See Figure 2).

Initiative and control with the teacher:

Thin democratic engagement in schooling life

Power with the teacher

Teachers tightly control assessment and curriculum

Initiative and control with the student:

Promotion of the autonomous learner

Thick democratic engagement

Student-directed learning

Negotiating the curriculum

Students as researchers (inquiry-based learning)

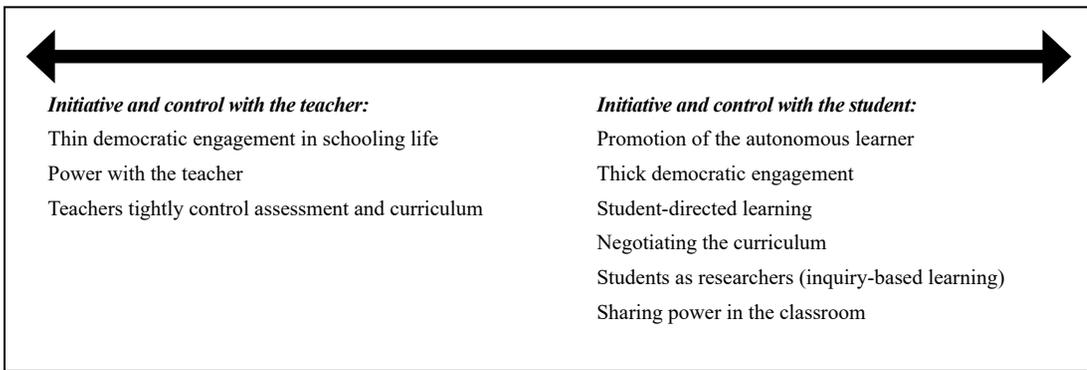Sharing power in the classroom

Figure 2. Power continuum (Adapted from Noyes, 2005, p. 522)

Reflecting on the students' experience of schooling at ASMS, we position the ASMS as a school leaning strongly towards the right hand side of this continuum. We have positioned the notions of freedom elicited from the students as manifesting across all of the domains of schooling; namely, the structures, the culture and the pedagogy of ASMS schooling as depicted in Figure 3.

The application of AI as a tool for school reviews

The AI process uncovered essential and taken for granted characteristics, essence, and understandings that are not typically accounted for in school reviews. The participants' enthusiasm and genuine interest in the process suggests that generative dialogue is indeed necessary in any review process, and when using an appreciative lens, can be full of life. The participants' readiness to recount their life-centric experiences and the clarity with which they completed this opened the dialogue to the relational and human aspects of their schooling.

The AI process is very relevant and user-friendly for teachers and students wanting a holistic consideration of their teaching programs from their students' points of view. The AI process appears to frame and enable an energizing review that identifies and describes enduring and essential characteristics with the inter-relational nature of a school context.

We suggest that this is not the usual experience for students involved in a school review. We wonder too whether the AI process is also a reminder that the educative influence is always enduring and always essential; the critical issue here is whether the influence is a positive one for the students.

Manifestations of the notion of freedom within the ASMS

Structure
100 minute lessons
Consistent building temperature
Computer access everywhere
Tutor group enables teacher catch-up and learning together opportunities
Close transition between university and school
Blend of structure and autonomy
No bells and open space with big windows
Free movement
Design makes me feel comfortable
Doesn't look like a school - has a *wow* factor
Spaces enable interaction with all teachers

What structures support a positive school culture?

What structures support learning?

AI and Student Voice
Appreciating student's lived experiences of schooling life at the ASMS

Culture
Friendly and positive relations
I can be me
Almost no bullying
Valuing of cultural diversity
Relaxed and inviting
Making new and lasting friendships
Never had real friends before
Teachers are your friends
Teacher student power relationship almost even
Want to be here
Self-select to be here
Take responsibility for own learning

Pedagogy
Co-construction of learning
Thematic cross-curricular teaching
Can do your own research
Students as teachers and researchers
Interesting and engaging
Exposures to educational expos
University connections and lecturers
Able to conduct experiments
Team teaching
Teachers are 'themselves' and don't stick to rigid routines
Lessons go deep
Students perform their learning

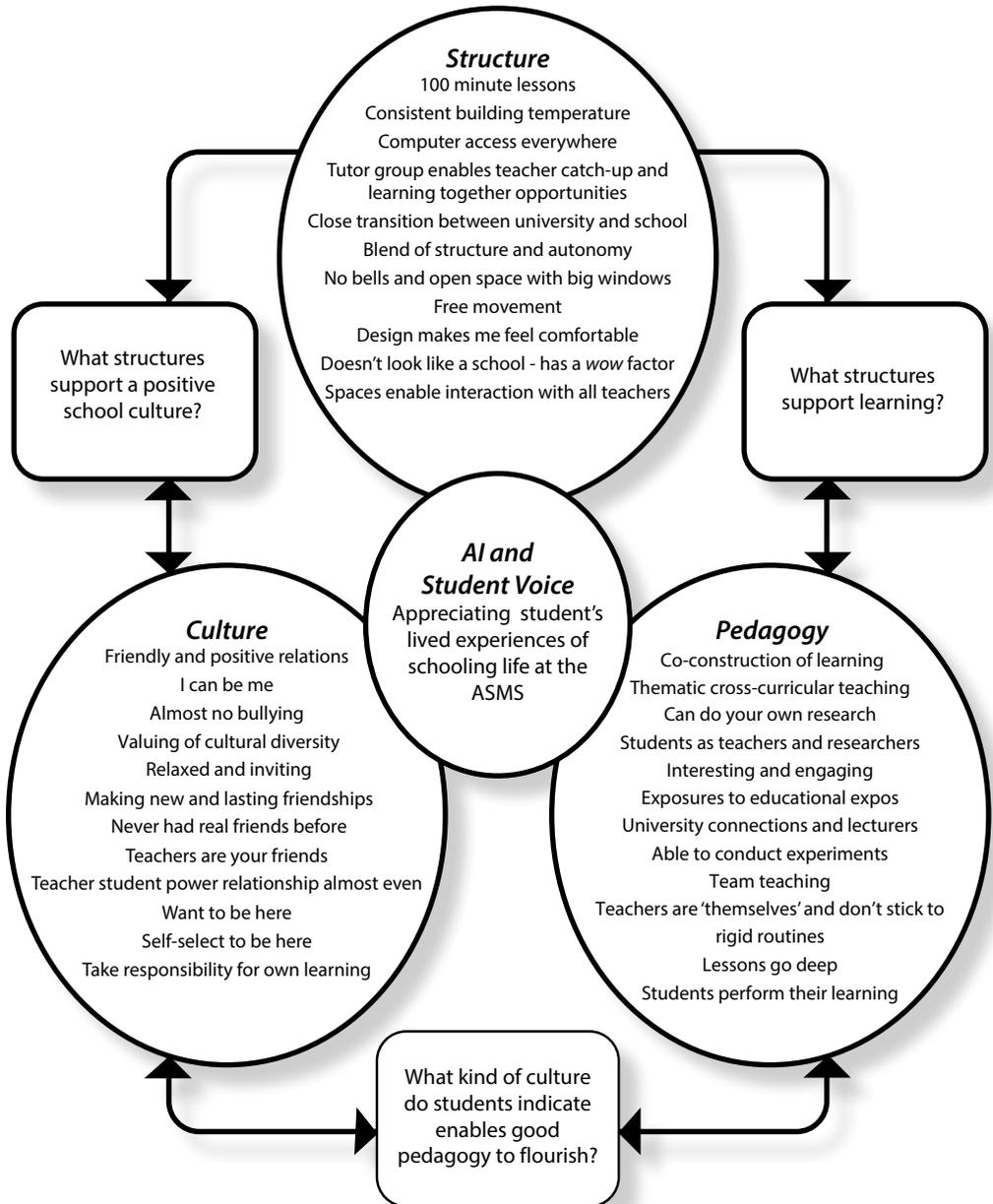What kind of culture do students indicate enables good pedagogy to flourish?

Figure 3. Key domains of ASMS schooling articulated by the students throughout the AI interviews

The necessity of moving the analysis within an AI from a coding activity to an interpretive and hermeneutic act was fundamental to the success of this research. This changed priority and emphasis within the analysis, we would argue, opens appreciative evidence to the voice of secondary students with regard to their experiences of schooling.

Conclusion

In an era calling for greater educational accountability into schooling effectiveness and improvement, all schools are exposed to an increasing array of accountability technologies that include external diagnostic school reviews and internal school self-review procedures. Our reading of school review technologies in South Australia is that they could be enhanced through embedding appreciative inquiry (AI) methodology into the review process with students. We concur with Soo Hoo (1993) who when writing about school evaluation declared:

> We listen to outside experts to inform us, and, consequently overlook the treasure in our very
> own backyards, the students. (Soo Hoo, 1993, p. 389)

While the positivist methodologies will always have their place, we argue they fall short as a methodology in being able to articulate the essential relational nature or social relations of schooling, and the sociological considerations of schools in relation to confounding and dominating structural, economic and political arrangements which work in multifarious ways to impact acceptable bureaucratic notions (the notion of the reviewers) of schooling purpose, schooling culture, schooling pedagogies and schooling structures, essentially the reviewers' hidden philosophical understandings of what makes a school a 'good' school.

What is most concerning about these methodological approaches to school review is that the key stakeholders in the schooling process, the students, the stakeholders that schooling is geared to work for, are at the receiving end of how schooling is done to them and often have little voice in the review process because positivist school review methodology is an inadequate methodology to capture it.

We therefore propose the wider application of AI within school review processes as instigated through our 'AI Amplifying Student Voice' research study undertaken at the ASMS. In the research students expressed experiential perceptions into how and why their participation in schooling at the ASMS was positively impacting upon their learning and their future career directions across the structural, cultural and pedagogical dimensions of schooling. In this research students revealed themselves as uncanny theorists of the experiential nature of the educational project we call schooling.

The semi-structured interview approach using AI methodology with students provided the ASMS leadership team with affirming insights into how students experienced ASMS approaches to learning; the sense of freedom created by the open classroom and building design of the school, the more equal power-relations between teachers and students, the collaborative learning culture in place and the various dimensions of curricular choice, curricular negotiation within personalised pedagogies of engagement. These insights opened up strategic discussions into how the leadership team could further build upon these affirmations within the curricular dimensions of their work.

The appreciative questions elicited rich recounts of students' life-centric experiences. These experiences became a catalyst for interpretive analysis that opened the meaning making process embedded in the experiences themselves. The generative power of AI appears to be a key agent in this process as the student re-lives former experiences, and in so doing creates further meanings and understandings about the nature of schooling and the opportunities for improvement.

The generative and creative process, known as AI, has the ability to move deficit school review discourses towards deep engagement and contemplative insight across the school community. The process, and the approach more generally, frames an appreciative discourse, which open participants' experiences in a generative manner towards ongoing and deepening reflections. We suggest that embedding an AI review approach within existing school review technologies affords teachers, leaders, students, and the wider community an appreciative lens as a means of understanding the enduring power of educational experiences.

The underlying proposition of this research lies in a deep-rooted belief that complex educational problems can only be properly comprehended by listening to the voices of young people as key informants about their world. (Down, Smyth, Robinson & McInerney, 2014, p. 3)

Kozel (2005) argues that students know best what goes on in their schools. This has been our experience in this research.

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