Appreciative inquiry with youth to create meaningful community projects

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Working in partnership with a community agency in a socially disadvantaged area of Melbourne, this research used an appreciative inquiry approach incorporating action research principles. Year 10 school students designed and successfully undertook community-building projects as part of a school subject, but with student control. Participants had previously reported a sense of alienation from their neighbourhoods and were in danger of disengaging from school. However, through the process of appreciating their identity and successfully creating community projects, the participants reported feelings of positive identity affirmation and being able to make a difference in their communities. Participants began a social transformation process of developing new positive narratives for an improved sense of community connectedness.

This paper describes the use of an appreciative inquiry methodology, incorporating action research principles, to work with potentially marginalised Year 10 school students in Melbourne's north-western suburbs. It facilitated the creation of meaningful community projects of the students' choice to meet school requirements.

Much of the social project work with young people is school-based and teacher directed, with projects often being minor, having little social impact or social awareness raising for the participants (Holdsworth, 2004; Pittman, Yohalem, & Tolman, 2003). Curricula imperatives need to be met, and project content often does not engage or extend the students. Assessment and evaluation are usually based on academic criteria, with some social measures such as school retention included.

Appreciative inquiry methodology is practised in organisational psychology and is drawn from positive psychology principles (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999). It is used to develop new ways of engaging the participants, as well as assessing the impacts and outcomes of the projects. Action research means that the learning from the successes of one project is fed into the subsequent projects. The positive effects of a strengths-based cyclic approach are the empowering benefits to the participants of personal affirmation and social connectedness, rather than school marks (Holdsworth, 2004).

This project provided participants with an opportunity to explore their hopes, celebrate their social identity and address their community concerns by creating participant-designed and participant-led community building and social action projects (Morsillo, 2003, 2005; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, in press).

Working Community Program

Educationalists were concerned with the low retention rates of students, particularly in socio-economically disadvantaged areas (Atweh, Christensen, & Dornan, 1998; Australian Centre for Equity through Education, 2001; Holdsworth, 2004). They were also concerned with the lack of alternative educational and employment opportunities, and the high rates of youth suicide, particularly in these marginalised areas.

Piloting programs that actively involve students in making connections with their local communities were seen as a way of retaining youth in schools (Curriculum Corporation, 2002; Department of Education and Training Victoria, 2002). By extending student programs beyond the academic school environment into the local community, students could gain a sense of connectedness with their local community. They also could gain vital teamwork, leadership and communication skills that would benefit future relationships and career prospects. A community-building project approach gives students a positive opportunity to contribute to the real world as active citizens.

The Working Community Pilot Program was a five-phase structured program that enabled secondary school students to develop their key competencies and enterprise skills, sense of personal and social responsibility, and their understanding of the world of work (Department of Education and Training Victoria, 2002). It was promoted by Turner and Baker (2000) who had developed citizenship programs for secondary students in the United Kingdom. The program was targeted to young people aged 15-16 years old, who were making the transition to adulthood as they moved from compulsory education (Year 10) to a world of greater choice and uncertainty. Students were able to develop their skills in the compulsory middle school stages before making choices related to possible future career pathways. Turner and Baker structured the phased nature of the program so that it mirrored many of the characteristics of this transition. The program moved away from activities that are organised by adults to the concept of young person-led projects. The community projects phase translates the values, ideas and aspirations of young people into practical projects that contribute to both their own learning and to the quality of life of their communities. This supportive structure and process was designed by Turner and Baker to engage a wide range of young people, including those who are underachieving and also those students who are at risk of social and economic exclusion (Department of Education and Training Victoria, 2002; Turner, 2002)

In the pilot Working Community Program, schools worked in partnership with community agencies and employers to support youth to engage with their community and take increasing responsibility and autonomy during the learning processes. The philosophy of the program was congruent with that of the current research. The learning outcomes included: (1) a set of personal and transferable skills categorised as TLC (Teamwork, Leadership and Communication); (2) developed an understanding of community roles; and (3) a developed appreciation of how students can support each other as peers, in their learning and in navigating their transition into non-compulsory school and other choices (Department of Education and Training Victoria, 2002).

The program targeted those youth considered at risk of disengagement from school, but included other students as well. It offered an opportunity for an improved sense of connectedness with their local community and a chance to participate to build resilience and feel an improved sense of well-being. By participating in this program, it was envisioned that the students would gain valuable teamwork and leadership skills in real-life community settings that would provide them work experience to improve their future employment prospects (Turner, 2002). However, school projects are typically teacher designed and controlled to meet educational demands and contain the activities to manageable levels.

The current research was developed from within a school program, but incorporated a series of principles and activities designed to develop participation, planning and decision-making by the students. This moved the activities and data gathering to a different realm.

Participation Principles

Youth have the potential to be more than non-citizen participants, more than being treated as only clients or consumers. Given opportunities they have the potential to more fully participate as citizens in the community. Youth do have ideas on what can be done to improve the community, if society is prepared to listen (Miles, 2002).

Participation principles for youth were developed by de Kort (1999), and include: (1) maximised control by youth to enable ownership and influence; (2) benefit to youth by providing tangible outcomes; (3) recognising and respecting the contribution of all by providing for access, equity, inclusiveness and diversity; and (4) involving real challenges and development by being of recognised value, reflective and responsive to needs. These principles extol the value of recognising and respecting the contribution youth can make given challenging opportunities for freedom of expression.

Recent research in Australia (Wierenga, Wood, Trenbath, Kelly, & Vidakovic, 2003) has shown that meaningful participation is important for young people in decision-making

Table 1
Components of the Code of Informality

Dimension	Definition	Impact	Project application
Voluntarism	A relatively constraint-free pattern of choice (of goals, means, affiliations) in which the cost of changing one's mind is minimal.	Developed a deep commitment to what has been elected and enhances the bargaining power of youth vis-a-vis adults.	*Participants chose to be involved with the group to do community projects of their choice and developed a strong commitment to the venture*
Multiplexity	A wide spectrum of activities that are more or less equivalent in value.	Enabled the participants with different abilities to optimise their potential thus fostering a positive self-image, multi-track personal mobility, and organic solidarity based on mutual dependence.	*Participant groups designed own community activities based on own social identity and concerns for the local community and worked as a supportive peer group to reach their goals*
Symmetry	A balanced reciprocal relationship based on equivalence of resources and mutual coordination of principles and expectations, in which no party can impose his or her rules on another.	Promoted the acceptance of universal values, such as "Do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you."	*Project choices and planning decisions were made mutually as a group with agreed mission statements and goals, with each person acting as part of the supportive team effort*
Dualism	The simultaneous existence of different orientations, such as ascription and achievement, competition and cooperation.	Offered the possibility of experimentation with contradictory patterns of behaviour.	*Communal projects needed high levels of co-operation within the group with some confrontational experiences of problem-solving teamwork in the process*
Moratorium	A temporary delay of duties and decisions that allows for trial and error within wide institutional boundaries.	Permitted experimentation with a wide variety of roles and assignments and an examination of different "truths."	*Participants initiate, plan, implement and reflect on their projects in experimental ways that might be successful*
Modularity	The eclectic construction of activity sets according to changing interests and circumstances.	Developed entrepreneurship and the ability to improvise and take advantage of situational opportunities.	*Participants become entrepreneurial in designing and implementing their own projects based on their social and cultural identity explorations*
Expressive Instrument-alism	A combination of activities that are performed both for their own sake and as a means of achieving future goals.	Enhanced the attraction and influences of activities and promotes the ability to postpone gratification.	*Participants develop new skills for their own personal benefit as well as that of the group and the local community*
Pragmatic Symbolism	The attribution of symbolic significance to deeds and/or conversion of symbols into deeds.	Extended the meaning of symbols and behaviour and makes them objects of identification.	*Participants consider own interests and concerns for the community to transform these into actions for the community*

Adpated from Kahane & Rapoport, 1997, p.26.

roles, with three key elements of: (1) meaning – doing something that has a bigger purpose and therefore that 'I believe in'; (2) control – making decisions, being heard and thus also having the skills to see the task through and do it well; (3) connectedness – working with others and being part of something bigger.

Unlike the typical classroom, youth participation requires an informal open approach (Kahane & Rapoport, 1997). It requires an openness to be flexible, to encourage engagement and freedom of expression. Kahane and Rapoport developed a code of informality (see Table 1) based on the assumptions that: (a) youth seek authentic meaning to their lives, that is, maximum self-expression by individuals and groups; (b) it is difficult to establish meaning in contemporary society, where change is so rapid; (c) certain social frameworks, such as community-based groups, encourage the creation of meaning by offering opportunities to interpret and construct experience; and (d) there are infinite ways of interpreting experience, but most individuals will choose more or less rationally (from their point of view) those interpretations that have the highest degree of authentic meaning for them. According to Kahane and Rapoport, participants need to feel that they can freely express themselves to contribute to a meaningful process for a meaningful outcome.

Meaningful participation with freedom of expression and freedom to pursue their own identity and have a voice as active citizens is what youth need to explore. By using the code of informality concepts (Kahane & Rapoport, 1997), participants can freely participate in meaningful ways, decide their own directions and goals, thus experiencing full participation. Appreciative inquiry uses these participation principles.

Why Appreciative Inquiry?

Appreciative inquiry focuses on asking an unconditional positive question to discover the best of what is, to explore ways to create positive transformations within a group or community (Barrett, 1995; Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999; Ludema, Cooperrider, & Barrett, 2001). It provides a process from the concept of positive psychology. Positive psychology suggests that rather than focusing on the illness and pathology to repair the damage, we seek to identify what is best in human beings, in rigorous pursuit of optimal human functioning and the building of a field focusing on human strengths and virtues (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Appreciative inquiry theory has been developed as a way of encouraging positive critical thinking by participants to transform human systems (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999). It refers to the power of the unconditional positive to ignite transformative dialogue and action within human systems (Barrett, 1995). Appreciative inquiry can be a way to approach organisational life inquiries, as other problem-based approaches to organisational life were finding that participants were de-energised and discouraged from the process (Barrett, 1995; Zemke, 1999).

Appreciative Inquiry Approach

Steps of the appreciative inquiry approach typically include selecting a positive topic: (1) to discover and appreciate the best of what is; (2) to dream and envision what could be; (3) to design and co-construct what should be; and (4) a destiny to sustain what will be (Ludema, Cooperrider, & Barrett, 2001).

The aim in this current research was for participants to explore ways to make a meaningful contribution to their local community and experience an enhanced sense of community connectedness. A four-dimensional (4D) appreciative inquiry technique was adapted with each participant group to: Discover the best of what is; dream of what could be; design what should be; and a destiny of creating what will be. Activities to achieve these steps included: (1) identity affirmation discovery with a passion game activity; (2) dreaming of community improvements with positive well-being questions and transformative learning discussions and activities; (3) designing and creating community projects with cycles of planning, action and reflection; and (4) designing a destiny of successful community projects for improved sustainable narratives. Table 2 sets out the phases of appreciative inquiry, with an added column on its application for youth participation in the current research.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of a class of 24 Year 10 students, with 12 females and 12 males, being

Table 2
Phases of appreciative inquiry

Base	Action	Youth Participation
1. Discovery	Appreciating *the best of what is*	Identity affirmation with *passion game*
2. Dream	Envisioning *what could be*	Community *visions* for improvement with positive well-being quest and transformative learning discussions
3. Design	Co-constructing *what should be*	Creating community *projects* with cycles of planning, acting and reflecting
4. Destiny	Sustaning *what will be*	Enhanced *narratives* of community connectedness

15 to 16 years old. They came from a wide diversity of ethnic backgrounds, reflecting that of the local community, including Anglo-Saxon, Indian, Italian, Greek, Macedonian, Maltese, Spanish and Vietnamese (Victorian Government, 2000). The students and their parents each agreed that the students could participant in the research, with formal consent forms signed by parents, with full approval having been obtained from the Victoria University Ethics Committee and the Victorian Department of Education.

Procedure

A school in the pilot Working Community Program contacted the partner agency of this research, for assistance with the initial group of students. The researchers gave some assistance, and offered to work closely with the next class of students. They were eager for assistance to further develop the Working Community Program with the next group of students.

The program consisted of the researcher (first author) working closely with the class teacher for three sessions weekly, including a whole afternoon each week, with a total of four hours per week for 12 weeks, plus two full school days of six hours each. This gave 60 hours contact with the students. The program, while having a number of weekly classes, also included a full day introductory session and a full day celebratory session at the end of the program.

The school students designed and successfully undertook community building projects in community arts, including: a drug-free underage dance party (8 students), a community theatre group (3), a student battle of the bands (2), children's activities in a cultural festival for refugees (7), and designing an Aboriginal public garden (4).

The students had two months to plan and complete their projects. They used class times, for which they had school and parental consent to leave the school grounds to organise their projects, as necessary. During one session per week the groups reported to the whole class on progress and discussed issues arising with their classmates. Thus, the students were encouraged to continually self-evaluate during the process, as part of the planning, action and reflection cycles of action research.

Each group worked autonomously to plan and undertake their project. Support was provided by the teacher and the researcher to assist them to clarify the issues and consider their options. However, the projects were student-led and student-designed, with the students taking responsibility for their own choices and actions. Each student group completed their project, or at least undertook a significant step towards the goal of their project.

To introduce the appreciative enquiry process and gather data in an action research

framework, a series of structured activities was developed in class times. These reflect a 4D approach to establishing meaningful, student led projects.

1D Discover the best of who we are

As youth actively explore their identities with their peers in their various youth subcultures (Miles, 2002; Watts, 1993), the first phase had the participants exploring their own identity, to discover and appreciate the best of what is (Ludema et al., 2001). Participants expressed their identity, explored common interests and shared values within the safety of a peer group. They appreciated the space to discuss identity when they felt emotionally safe to express issues, using the code of informality concepts to plan their own projects (Kahane & Rapoport, 1997).

A passion game was a way to explore personal passions and interests and find out the common identity interests of the participants. This game was adapted from a traditional getting-to-know you exercise, to elicit the participants' interests and passions around their identity. The game involved asking participants a series of questions based on Do you feel passionate about this particular activity? Participants moved to one side of the room if they were passionate about that activity and to the other side if they definitely were not interested and stayed in the middle if they didn't care or had a mild interest. The questions covered interests in sport, fitness, outdoor activities, thrill–seeking activities, the arts, music, dancing, drama, performing, cooking, eating foods from other cultures, environmental issues, and topical issues such a concern for refugees. For each question those who moved to the passionate side were asked their specific interest (e.g., actual sport, type of music). This helped each participant to think about their own passions and identify others with similar interests, offering the potential to consider working together on a project of mutual interest.

Subsequent discussions on participant interests can reveal further mutual identity issues and engender enthusiasm to pursue and celebrate these issues. Exploring a common group identity is a preliminary step to planning and implementing community projects (Giroux, 1988; Stringer, 1999).

2D Dream of what we could do

The next phase of the appreciative inquiry approach involved participants dreaming and envisioning what could be improved in the community (Barrett & Peterson, 2000; Frantz, 1998). Participants explored social justice issues using critical thinking or critical inquiry as part of the process of transformative learning (Prilleltensky, 2003). Participants shared community concerns and values through discussion and a passion chart, to dream of: Guided group discussions and activities were undertaken to explore mutual community concerns, including questions like: "If I were the mayor with a million dollars to improve this place for young people I would . . ."

Participants used transformative learning techniques of brainstorming and discussing their visions, their dreams, to experience an improved local community. Group discussions explored what was needed for survival in the community and to enhance the community. Questions were raised, based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1971). Basic questions included: What are our basic survival needs? and What do you need to feel a sense of well-being?

The passion chart activity, with participants in pairs or small groups, is a way of developing their dreams and visions. For example, poster paper and coloured pens were provided for participants to draw and write up their own passions, interests, beliefs and concerns. Passion charts were also used to enable participants to start to dream of creative ideas for community projects and to begin to address their mutual interests and concerns.

3D Design a project of what could be

Designing community action projects was the next phase of appreciative inquiry, where action research steps of planning, implementing and reflecting came into play. In self-chosen small groups of common interest, participants planned creative celebratory projects with supportive local community partners, to design how: "We will make a difference in our community by . . ." The

participants critically assessed their own needs, planned their own interventions, and implemented specific actions, with cycles of evaluation throughout the process. This resulted in youth-led and youth-designed community projects (Finn & Checkoway, 1998; Headley, 2002; Holdsworth, 2003).

Planning community projects involved identifying issues and designing "what should be". Through participation in the community, participants defined themselves and developed a new belief in their ability to change aspects of their personal and social environments (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988).

Participants actively designed their own community projects. They identified an issue they wished to pursue, explored ways to pursue the issue, developed a vision with a mission statement of what they wanted to create and developed goals to achieve their visions of a community action project to improve their local community.

Action research by participants empowered them to implement the projects they designed and created. Participants developed problem-solving skills, to organise and manage projects (Lewis, 1998; Westhorp, 1987); and they gained experience in taking on adult responsibilities of citizenship (Wyn, 1995). They were not treated just as children or passive students, but took on meaningful tasks that they managed themselves. In the process the participants developed teamwork, leadership and communication skills (TLC) (Department of Education and Training Victoria, 2002). Participants developed personal skills for social life, career prospects, community involvement, and local activism. They also developed cultural interests and ways to improve personal and community well-being, with participants expressing pride in their achievements.

4D Destiny of a meaningful project of what will be

The final phase was the destiny of participants undertaking their community projects and evaluating the benefits of their own involvement, for a destiny of: "We have learnt from this project that . . ." Planning, implementation and critical reflection was learned in action research cycles through the

development of their projects. This was documented from verbal self-reports, written evaluations of personal experiences -- both during and at the end of the process.

Each student group worked autonomously to plan and undertake their respective community projects. Support was provided by the teacher and the researcher to assist them to clarify the issues and consider their options. However, the projects were student-led and student-designed, with the students taking responsibility for their own choices and actions.

Results

This section reflects upon a series of different levels of results that were achieved in this research. Firstly, it briefly deals with the outcomes experienced by the students and the program itself. The section then reviews the impact of the appreciative inquiry methodology and its applicability to this type of research.

Each student group completed their chosen project, or at least undertook a significant step towards the goal of their project. The public underage dance party; the school battle of the bands; and the refugee cultural festival children's activities groups completed their projects with the events specified in their mission statements. The other two groups were able to undertake the design phase of their projects within the timeframe: the community theatre company proposal group with an initial grant application and a one-off promotion performance; and the Aboriginal public garden group developed a draft garden design in collaboration with an Aboriginal park ranger.

The students were each involved in evaluating their group projects throughout the process (with verbal reports to the class each week) and completed verbal and written evaluations at the conclusion of their respective projects. The students also took photographs of their projects that they added to their written evaluations. They mounted a selection of their photos onto poster cardboard to be included in a class video covering their projects and in oral evaluations. These images of lived experience provided another dimension to the evaluation process (Berger,

Mohr, & Philibert, 1982; Burgin, 1982; Tagg, 1988). Three groups completed their project, and two accomplished the planning stage.

Outcomes reported in the participants' written evaluations revealed a positive effect of the program. These responses can be summarised in the following themes reflecting individual, group and community level outcomes (see Table 3):

(1) Individual: Participants' evaluations reflected the freedom of expression experienced in the projects, with a sense of pride and hopefulness that they were trusted to act independently to discover and dream of their community projects – "The best part of the program would be the freedom to organise your own community event as you feel proud of your own achievement" (Mandy, Bands); and "The highlight of my experience would have been the satisfaction we all felt when the night that we had been planning, stressing over and having sleepless nights about became a rip roaring success. It was a real adrenalin rush for all of us" (Donald, Dance Party group).

(2) Group: Participants expressed a sense of confidence in developing leadership, organisational, and teamwork skills to design and problem-solve through control of their own projects – "the program helped me become independent and able to organise with my group an event with hardly any assistance" (Britany, Children) and "It is a great way to build skills, and give you a realisation of what YOU are capable of and what YOU can achieve when you put your mind to it. I am glad that I had the opportunity to build my skills in such a way that I have never experienced in school before. The fact that this one program can offer so much more is really something and I look forward to using the skills I have developed in all my subjects and even out of school." (Josie, Children, her emphasis).

(3) Community: Participants revealed an improved sense of community connectedness, appreciating the challenge to make a meaningful contribution to the community through community action projects – "a sense of satisfaction that you were able to put something back into the community for once" (Donald, Dance); and "It really opened my eyes and now I know I can still contribute

Table 3
Student participant outcomes

Level of Analysis	Self-reported Outcomes
Personal	*Freedom of Expression* • Social identity affirmation • Acting on enhanced socio-political awareness • Felt trusted to act independently leading to a sense of control • Sense of pride and hopefulness
Group	*Influence* • Sense of confidence and group solidarity • Development of leadership, organizational and teamwork skills • Independence and motivation with own project management, design and problem-solving
Community	*Community Connectedness* • Embraced challenge to make meaningful contributi9on to community youth involvement • Created own community action projects • Created own sense of community connectedness

to the community, making a small difference which sums up with other people's efforts, to make a big difference overall" (Vin, Garden group).

The participants initially expressed alienation from their local communities. Youth living in socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods can feel disaffected, with little sense of community and with few facilities or opportunities for involvement (Furlong & Cartmet, 1997; Zimmerman, 1990). This has been shown to be linked with higher suicide rates (Carr-Gregg, 2003; Fuller, 1998).

Youth seeking a sense of community find it with peers who have a similar identity (Eckersley, 2004; Miles, 2002). However, they often do not find it in their local communities or the wider community. They feel particularly marginalised, often for the very reason that they are youth and not children or parents (Wyn & White, 1997). Through the appreciative inquiry process, the participants in the current research reported feelings of positive identity affirmation and being able to make a meaningful difference in their communities.

Participants began to develop new positive community narratives for an improved sense of community connectedness. Early in the group process students made such comments as: "What can we do? We are only kids; We don't have any connections". However, at the completion of their projects, comments included: "I learned a lot about how the world works", "it opened my eyes to the needs of our youth", "you get to interact with other people in the community, which is a thing you wouldn't normally do", "meetings with community service workers gave us the independence and presented us with problems that we had to tackle, not just as individuals, but as a group", and "I developed my awareness to community issues and helping out in the community".

Youth Identity Affirmation.

Social identity affirmation is important to develop a sense of community within the youth group, with peers who have shared values (Gibson, 1993; Pretty, 2002; Skoe & Lippe, 1998; Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999). Early work with each group in this research involved positive affirmation of personal identity, interests and passions.

Positive evaluation comments reflected participants' welcoming the opportunity for self-expression and positive affirmation of their identity. The groups used an appreciative inquiry approach to explore their identity, with the first author facilitating each group. The researcher provided information, when asked, on possible community connections of interest for the participants to pursue. However, the participants themselves chose which connections to follow up and soon developed their own connections and initiatives. They shared common values and common interests, leading to a sense of community within each group.

Youth Community Concerns.

Youth community concerns were also pursued using the same process of identifying personal concerns and group concerns to explore common themes. Participants developed critical thinking, with transformation learning processes, through group discussions and various activities. Often group concerns were built on personal identity interests, or linked to form a community action project incorporating both identity and community concerns. For example, groups of students identifying music as their common interest, with one group organising Disc Jockey's for a dance party, another promoted their own community theatre with a musical performance.

Youth Hope for a Better World.

Participants in each group of this research regularly told of alienation in their local neighbourhoods (Burke, 2004; Greene, 1995; Miles, 2002). The students spoke of a lack of entertainment opportunities for self-expression, and suitable recreational facilities – this they saw as leading to drug abuse problems. Youth experienced forms of alienation from their local community, but engagement in realistic, meaningful projects through school could provide positive developments to overcome this.

The students' leadership and project management skills improved markedly when they realised that they were given free reign and full responsibility for their actions. Also, they made meaningful connections with the wider community sector, where the community workers reinforced the responsibility they had to follow correct procedures in relation to public expectations and rules and regulations for public

safety, and for the success of their projects. By creating something of value the students acquired the interest and skills for service learning and citizenship (Checkoway, 1998; Holdsworth, 2003; Turner & Baker, 2000).

Reflections on the Appreciative Inquiry Approach to Participation

Youth Participation

A participatory approach is valuable for working with marginalised youth (Bostock & Freeman, 2003; Schwab, 1997). This participatory approach, using appreciative inquiry, incorporated concepts of: affirmation theory from organisational psychology; critical thinking or transformational learning, promoting social justice awareness and problem-solving skills from educational theories; and self-expressive community arts from creative arts applications (Ciofalo-Lagos, 1997; Greene, 1995; Mayo, 2000; Miles, 2002; Mulvey & Mandel, 2003; Thomas & Rappaport, 1996)

Youth Benefits

Youth participation was the focus of this research. Youth planned and implemented community action projects, thereby improving their own problem-solving skills. Arguably, this could lead to an improved sense of empowerment and well-being (Checkoway, Finn, & Pothukuchi, 1995; Headley, 2002). Participants reported benefiting from teamwork, leadership and communication (TLC) skills development. They learnt program management skills that could be of assistance in further study and future work.

Community Connectedness

Participants in this research reported significant improvement in their sense of community connectedness. Using a participatory research approach, they affirmed their sub-culture identities and explored their community concerns. By planning, implementing and reflecting on their own community action projects, the participants actively began to weave new, more positive narratives (Carroll, 2001; Freedman & Combs, 1996; Rappaport, 1995). Where there had previously been stories of alienation and disempowerment, narratives of mutual cultural identity began to form.

Lessons from Participation

Discovery of Best of Who You Are

Youth appreciate exploring their own identity to re-discover the best of who they are.

Identity affirmation approaches are useful to build on the strengths and positive aspects of socially disadvantaged youth. They need to be able to freely express their identity including: cultural identity; sexual identity; and any other youth subculture identities. Youth celebrated their identities though their own choice of cultural arts and environmental projects. In a supportive safe environment youth can create their own sense of community connectedness. Taking time with participants to understand and appreciate the best of who they are is particularly important with youth who have suffered trauma or significant rejection in their lives.

Participation programmes to engage at-risk youth are becoming increasingly utilised in a variety of imaginative formats (Checkoway, Finn, & Pothukuchi, 1995; Foundation for Young Australians, 2001; Headley, 2002). The participants in such programmes experienced various levels of empowerment and accompanying levels of control within the program. Often, however, the program content is determined by program leaders, leaving the participants feeling constrained by the pre-determined directions.

In the current research, participants had the opportunity to consider their own identity with their peers to design their own projects, to connect in meaningful ways to their own local neighbourhoods, and to make a perceived difference. Participants who had felt alienated from their local neighbourhoods were able to work with their sub-cultural groups to affirm their identity and make new positive connections with their local communities.

An appreciative inquiry research approach allowed for reflection on the social structures with which youth interact. The sub-cultural aspects of youth are of interest in their own right, but they are of more interest as part of a symbiotic relationship with broader aspects of social change (Conger & Galambos, 1997; Mackay, 1999; Miles, 2002). In contrast to dominant cultural views (Calcutt, 1998), some argue that youth cultures do not reflect a relative rebelliousness, but rather reflect the creative ways in which youth interpret the structural and cultural changes that surround them (Calcutt, 1998; Furlong & Cartmet, 1997; Miles, 2002; White & Wyn, 1998; Wyn & White, 2000).

The research sought to work with these creative youth sub-cultures, to affirm their identity and self-identified lifestyle issues, and to provide participants with opportunities to explore ways to use this creative energy to design their own community action projects. Traditionally, youth cultural identities have been considered to simply be a reflection of more fundamental structural aspects of youth transitions (Cieslik & Pollock, 2002; Miles, 2000). Researchers argued that youth cultural experiences represent the actual area within which they seek to cope with, and at times defy, the ups and downs of structural change (Miles, 2002). The process of individuation represents a key aspect of the experience of social change for youth. Youth could be seen as rebelling from within. In an individualised society the opportunities to rebel are less obvious than they were in the past (Calcutt, 1998). Rather, youth call upon aspects of consumer culture, which they can use to construct their identities, while rejecting those aspects to which they do not relate (Eckersley, 2004; Ginwright & James, 2002; Mackay, 1999). Youth are not passive, even though they are not often politically vocal. They can use the resources provided for them by consumer culture to cope with the rapidity of social and structural change (Miles, 2002; White & Wyn, 1998).

Dreaming of What Could Be

Socially disadvantaged youth often lack conventional opportunities for self-expression. They can also lack opportunities and support to pursue suitable educational, recreational and employment pathways. However, youth can envision an improved community, appreciating opportunities to freely express their views and ideas of what could be. They appreciate the opportunity to explore their mutual community concerns and ideas for community improvements.

Designing What Should Be

Youth appreciate opportunities for practical self-expression to design their own community projects. This appreciative approach has the benefit of gathering the unique perspectives of each person, when combined with the perspectives of others, to create new possibilities for action that previously lay dormant or undiscovered (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). Youth can express their ideas by actively

designing and leading their own community action projects. Supported creative programs can be of benefit to marginalised youth who often have few opportunities to freely express their creativity within the wider community (Yates & Youniss, 1996). Schools can offer creative programs to support social identity explorations and provide opportunities for community connection programs to engage and retain their students. Peer support and mentoring programs, leadership and interpersonal skills programs, and community projects, can also assist with retention of youth at-risk of disengagement from school (Delgado, 1996; Fyson, 1999; Hedin & Eisikovits, 1982).

Destiny of What Will Be

Youth participating in this research created for themselves the beginnings of social transformation both for themselves and their local communities. They did so through affirmation, where youth had opportunities within a trusting environment to build on their own social, cultural and sexual identity to create community projects of their choice.

Conclusions

An appreciative inquiry approach, with full engagement and participation of youth and/or adults within their particular community, can be adapted and promoted for mutual benefit of the individuals involved and the whole community. It is adaptable to a variety of youth settings from schools to social and community focused groups to youth decision-making councils and bodies. The appreciative inquiry approach has also been shown to be of benefit to adult groups in various settings and could be further promoted within business corporations, community and government organisations to promote full participation of the members of any particular community. Each member of the community can feel appreciated and valued for their opinion and can participate in visioning exercises and in new initiatives to improve the particular environment within an organisation or a wider community initiative, for mutual benefit (Barrett & Fry, 2002; Barrett & Peterson, 2000; Cooperrider, Barrett, & Srivastva, 1995; Ludema, Wilmot, & Srivastva, 1997).

A grassroots, bottom-up approach to appreciative inquiry involves all participants in creative expression and practice It encourages

meaningful involvement and commitment to the process and outcomes associated with improving community and social transformation.

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