



# Playing to our strength: An Appreciative Inquiry approach to appraisal

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## ABSTRACT

*Appraisal processes are a requirement for professionals working in the education sector. Often appraisal processes do not focus on strengths, rather, it becomes a process of meeting pre-determined requirements. This article takes a strength-based approach to appraisal and discusses a study which pilots the use of an Appreciative Growth Cycle process. The study focused on the growth of future professional practice within an organisational team. An Appreciative Inquiry methodology (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) guided the study. The purpose of the study was to trial the feasibility and application of the Appreciative Growth Cycle process for its possible use across a wider organisational context. The research question therefore that drove the study was: In what ways might the use of an Appreciative Growth Cycle process be applied within a wider organisational context?*

## INTRODUCTION

Appraisal processes are a requirement for professionals working in the education sector. Often appraisal does not focus on strengths; rather, it becomes a process of meeting pre-determined requirements. Teachers in Aotearoa/New Zealand are required by their governing teacher registration body (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand) to engage in ongoing appraisal of practice. There has been a movement in the education sector towards inquiry and reflection as a professional learning model to support the appraisal process.

This article discusses a 2022 study (later reported on in Ryder, 2024), which takes a strength-based approach to appraisal which pilots the use of Appreciative Growth Cycle process. The study focused on the growth of future professional practice within an organisational team for a private initial teacher education provider. Participants within the study evaluated strengths in their practice, and identified aspirations, and future practice goals.

Before introducing the *Appreciative Growth Cycle* (Ryder, 2024), it is essential to understand the contextual background in which it is set. The process is underpinned by the notion of inquiry, reflection and, to some extent, appraisal.

To look back to previous appraisal approaches commonly used for teachers in Aotearoa/New Zealand, we need to explore a few relevant models that incorporate inquiry and reflection. Within a *Teaching as Inquiry* approach, individual teachers review their own practice, which was foregrounded by Timperley, Kaser and Halbert (2014), and more recently Sinnema and Aitken (2021). Giles (2019) provides a five-stage Appreciative Appraisal process that not only requires written reflections as evidence of strengths-based practice, but also allows for insightful two-way dialogue.

Ryder's (2024) research study identified appreciative dispositions, and explored how the identification of these dispositions might guide future practice within an appraisal-based growth cycle, to be referred to as the *Appreciative Growth Cycle*. Strong alignments can be seen between Giles (2019) Appreciative Appraisal and the requirements of the *Professional Growth Cycle* process (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2021). For example, forms of information collection are advocated for as evidence of practice, and the requirement that teachers engage in an appraisal process where they discuss and receive feedback on their teaching. Giles (2019) also advocates for teachers writing reflective stories as a means of documentation of practice.

The aim of this study is to investigate the use of the *Appreciative Growth Cycle* process and *Appreciative Dispositions* within an organisational team. The purpose of the study is to trial the feasibility and application for its possible use across a wider organisational context. The research question that guided the study is: *In what ways might the use of an Appreciative Growth Cycle process be applied within a wider organisational context?*

## **METHODOLOGY**

An *Appreciative Inquiry* methodology frames this study. *Appreciative Inquiry* (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Kung et al., 2013) is a positive and strength-based approach based on the assumption that meaning is co-constructed through stories of lived experiences and social interactions. Kung et al., (2018) reminds us of how an 'appreciative' framework to inquiry supports participants to bring their best practice to the foreground and carry this with them into the future.

The participants in the study were a group of eight lecturers. Three of the participants were also co-researchers in the study. On completion of investigating the use of the *Appreciative Growth Cycle*, a group discussion was held. It is the data from this group discussion that informs the findings for this study.

Within the *Appreciative Growth Cycle* process participants followed a four-step process or the 4D cycle of inquiry, Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny.

1. Discovery - In the first stage of the 4D process, Discovery, participants reflect on personal high points of practice, revealing the core factors that give life to their teaching. During this Discovery stage the focus is on appreciating the best of current practice, 'looking at what has been' and 'what is' to provide insights into what makes peak experiences (Chapman & Giles, 2009).
2. Dream - In this stage these insights are used to imagine and visualise future practice based around their strengths and aspirations (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Questions and imagination inform progress through the Dream stage where participants ask themselves

“what would my practice look like if I stepped five years into the future? What is different and how might I have contributed to this?”

3. Design - Co-constructing a framework for the future in the Design stage emerges out of participants Dreams of what might be. Insightful two-way dialogue supports the construction of value statements that challenge previous assumptions of professional practice.
4. Destiny – in the final stage Destiny, participants form a set of aspirational statements that are designed to be provocative with the intentions of developing a set of aspirational statements. An action plan is then identified with short, mid and long-term goals (Kung et al., 2013).

### **THE APPRECIATIVE GROWTH CYCLE IN ACTION:**

Over a period of 6 months the participants undertook the *Appreciative Growth Cycle* process. This process reflects the 4D cycle of *Appreciative Inquiry*, i.e., Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny in action. Each stage of the 4D cycle is stated in boxes in the following sections and are supported by participant responses from the focus group interview and links to Appreciative Inquiry literature. Each stage is written up as a guide for teachers to apply to their own appraisal process. We start by exploring the first ‘Discover’ stage.

#### **Discover stage**

*Prior to the first appraisal meeting:*

1. Choose an area of your practice which makes you ‘feel the most alive’. This may be an area that you feel is a current strength, or you could focus on an area you want to strengthen further. Identify approx. three - four instances of when you felt the most alive within current or previous practice.
2. Discuss these instances at your first appraisal.

*Over the following 2-3 months (and prior to the mid-appraisal meeting):*

3. Write a detailed reflection describing ‘the best of your practice’ for each of the instances identified in #1. Try to incorporate inspiring strengths-based language in the reflections, shifting any current mindsets and vocabulary away from deficit-focused thinking.

*Identifying times in your practice when you ‘feel the most alive.’*

At the focus group the first question that was asked is how effective the phrase ‘feels the most alive’ was as a prompt to start the reflection process from a strengths-based perspective. The overall response was that the participants found the phrase ‘feels the most alive’ a helpful technique to put them into an ‘appreciative’ head space to write their reflections. This ‘appreciative’ way of thinking links to Kung et al., (2013) who discuss how, rather than taking a problem-solving approach to research, Appreciative Inquiry looks at best practice and how to grow and transform from stories of what practitioners do well. Transformation was evident in some of the comments in the focus group, for

example one participant discussed how “I found the first part motivating, because that’s all I want to do – what makes me feel alive”. Chapman and Giles (2009) remind us that during this Discovery phase the focus is on appreciating ‘the best of’ aspects of current practice. Practitioners in Chapman and Giles (2009) study looked at ‘what has been’ and ‘what is’ to provide insights into peak experiences within their practice.

Transformation occurred for other participants in the focus group, and it could be seen how the phrase ‘feeling the most alive’ prompted them to immediately go to a deeply reflective place, in a very short time. For example, one participant described how the language provided “a way into how to engage in the process” and talked of her first encounter with the term being quite “an explosive kind of moment”. The phrase ‘feeling the most alive’ was so transformational for this participant that they articulated how it “takes you to the core of who you are, your purpose and your drive”. As the participants reflected on personal high points, it was evident how they were revealing the core factors that give life to their practice (Chapman & Giles, 2009).

Not everyone chose to reflect on areas they felt they already did well in. Some participants in the focus group took the opportunity to highlight areas in their practice they found challenging. One participant stated “I chose the area I feel the most overwhelmed with. But when I looked back on it, it [the reflection process] took a lot of weight off it”. Therefore, whilst the practice was viewed as challenging, the reflective approach that was taken allowed them to see a way forward. This is reiterated when they state, “It provided a pathway, and I could keep following that way forward”. The notion of a pathway links to Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) who discuss the Appreciative Inquiry process as a path towards transformation. Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) refer to a transformation of inquiry, imagination, and innovation, where the untapped riches of our positive core bring life and meaning to our practice.

#### *The value of written reflections within the ‘Discovery’ process*

Having identified a current strength (or otherwise), the participants were asked to write reflections on their strengths-based practice. One of the benefits of this approach is the empowering and transformative nature of the process for the participants (Giles & Alderson, 2008). Approximately three months was provided to write the reflections. The participants were asked how they wrote their reflections, how many did they end up writing, and what they thought was a reasonable and manageable number of reflections to write.

In response to these questions, there was a range in how many reflections they wrote and how they were structured. As the structure used to write the reflections was intentionally not specified, participants used a variety of ways to guide their writing process. As an example, some participants preferred using an existing reflective model, another created their own, and many preferred not having a formula for compartmentalising. The number of reflections each participant wrote varied from three to six, and the consensus was this range would be enough to draw on to create their aspirational statements.

A key emphasis on writing reflections within the Discovery stage of the Appreciative Growth Cycle process is the focus on strength-based language which enables participants to reflect on ‘the best of their practice’. The participants were asked how difficult or otherwise it was to use strengths-based language and move away from deficit-focused thinking. Whilst one participant in the focus group

stated, “It’s not natural to think highly of oneself”, other participants commented that once they made the shift in thinking to a strengths-based approach that they felt more at ease with using positive language. One participant said “what helped me was the reflective process, where the more you talk about the process – it helps to see myself in a professional sense. An objective distance comes in.”

Another participant commented that “By the time we started the process and got into it, it wasn’t too challenging. I probably didn’t use super over the top language, but it was positive”. Reflecting on previous experiences allowed participants to appraise their practice in a constructive way. They said, “Things don’t empower me until they are completed. Analysing it – I realised that I could see what I am good at.” For this participant they were then able to focus on their strengths and this process gave them a way to assess these positively.

In terms of using strengths-based language, one participant commented that while it wasn’t hard to use positive wording, gauging the tone of this was ‘hard to write’. A way for some participants to manage this was to refer to the language in the appreciative dispositions ‘table’ that was provided for their use to reflect on and analyse their practice. One participant said that they used “the appreciative dispositions and copied and pasted them and coded them in specific colours” to carry out this process. A final comment gives some valuable insight into how the participants approached focusing on the ‘best of [their] practice’. The participant said that: “It’s about teacher identity. I had to get over the embarrassment to myself. I will hopefully get more natural over time. It has changed the lens of how you view yourself.”

Another participant confirms the value of this approach further when they state that it “validates why you are here... it overrides the negative”. Over-riding the negative was a focus for Giles and Alderson (2008) who, in their research used Appreciative Inquiry with participants who had previously been unsuccessful in their studies. Giles and Alderson’s (2008) participants engaged in strength-based reflective dialogue and the authors discussed how, once the students emerged from the appreciative process they had a new hope-filled discourse.

Next, we move on to the mid-way stage of the appraisal process.

### **Dream stage**

Prior to the mid-way appraisal:

4. Refer to the *Appreciative Dispositions Table* to help identify and analyse strengths within your reflections. Note this down.
5. Reflect on the following aspirational statement ‘if you were to step forward five years and look back, what would you like your practice to look like?’

In the Dream phase participants draw on their insights to imagine and visualise future practice based on strengths and aspirations (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Questions and imagination inform progress through the Dream stage where participants ask, ‘what would I like my practice to look like if I stepped five years into the future and looked back?’ What is different and how might I have contributed to this? (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005).

This ‘dream’ stage of the process saw the participants analysing their practice against the *Appreciative Dispositions Table*, as follows.

<b>Appreciative Dispositions</b>
Being responsive and relationally attuned with others.
Being empathetic, and advocating for others
Being aware of the intentions of others through being a thoughtful and confident practitioner
Being intuitive, purpose-driven and resolute in understanding how to precede
Being able to embrace uncertainty, being flexible and able to improvise.
Being pedagogically leaderful, displaying integrity and a moral knowing

Table 1: *Appreciative Dispositions*

By drawing out some key strengths-based indicators of their practice, the participants were then asked to write aspirational statements that linked to key themes identified in their practice.

Participants used the Appreciative Dispositions Table to analyse their strengths-based practice. For some participants one disposition stood out for them clearly over all others. For many of the participants, they analysed their reflections in a very similar way, which was as one participant said, “I looked through [the *Appreciative Dispositions Table*] and chose the ones that resonated with me”. Many of the participants used a form of coding to analyse the appreciative dispositions they identified with. One participant stated, “I used it [the *Appreciative Dispositions Table*] to code my analysis of my reflections. Then I could see how often they came up. I then focussed on the top few”. Another participant states, “I looked at each reflection and looked at each disposition and then I coded them. The ones that came through the most – I aligned with”. Participants could clearly see that some of the dispositions stood out more than others. For another participant, it was after the analysis process had finished that they saw value in the process, saying “I see evidence of my confidence afterward [the analysis]. That’s when I get clarity”.

The process now moves from the Dream to the Design stage.

**Design stage**

Mid-way through the process:

6. Share your thinking about how your practice relates to specific *Appreciative Dispositions* and discuss possible changes for future practice that would have real, positive potential.
7. Following this discussion, write this potential future up as an aspirational statement and decide on short-, mid- and long-term goals that envisages that positive potential future.

This stage of the Appreciative Growth Cycle process is where participants identify aspirational statements and set goals. The purpose of participants writing aspirational statements is for them to design envisaged future practice (Chapman & Giles, 2009). The process of identifying aspirational statements and setting goals was approached in different ways by the participants in the focus group. One participant used language from the *Appreciative Dispositions Table* to support them in formulating their aspirational statements. In reference to creating their aspirational statements, another participant stated that they “found that it [the wording] just fell out effortlessly”. The *Appreciative Growth Cycle* process supported this participant, with this stage of the process who stated that they did not find this part of the process difficult as “we were already there by the time we got to the aspiration”.

Participants also found the following prompt ‘if I was to step forward and look back five years, what would I want my practice to look like’ helpful as a guide towards creating their aspirational statements. One participant commented that the aspirational statements “allowed me to think about goals and what to do about them”. Most participants found creating the aspirational statement to be a positive, “mana enhancing” process. This participant shared that for them “the whole process was positive rather than dwelling on areas to improve, reminding us that we are okay and reminding me I am good at what I am are doing”.

We now come to the final Destiny stage of the process.

### **Destiny stage**

At the conclusion of the appraisal cycle:

8. Share aspirational statements and short-, mid- and long-term goals, to be embedded in your future practice.

Kung, et. al., (2013) explains that the purpose of developing a set of aspirational statements is to identify an action plan that will strengthen the life-centric characteristics of future practice. Therefore, the benefits of sharing professional aspirations and goals are immense. It is in the process of teachers sharing their aspirations and goals, that change can be realised and embedded in future practice.

### **Overall reflections for participants on carrying out the Appreciative Growth Cycle process.**

The final question asked to the participants in the focus group was whether engaging in the process would be helpful as part of an on-going appraisal process. The participants were overwhelmingly positive about engaging in the *Appreciative Growth Cycle* process as part of their professional appraisal. The participants commented that while ‘you do put a lot of yourself into it’ that the process was very meaningful for their practice. As an example, one participant gave insight into the impact that this process had on their teaching, and discussed how they introduced Appreciative Inquiry into their teaching with the students.

Another comment from the participants related to the process of *Appreciative Growth Cycle* and how this aligns with their pedagogy. The participants referred to how in the New Zealand early childhood education sector

there is a focus on viewing children as capable and competent (Ministry of Education, 2017). This resonates strongly with the participants who recognise alignments with what they teach, who they are (their own teacher identity) and an Appreciative Inquiry approach.

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on Ryder's (2024) study, it was recommended that further research be carried out exploring the use of the *Appreciative Growth Cycle* process in conjunction with the *Appreciative Dispositions*. This article reports on that resulting recommended research. The participants in the study found the *Appreciative Growth Cycle* an effective means towards identifying strengths and realising future envisaged practice. The intention is for the private initial teacher education provider to incorporate the *Appreciative Growth Cycle* alongside the existing appraisal process. The authors found that performing Appreciative Inquiry collectively as a team enabled a space for co-constructing meaning and thereby allowing transformation to occur.



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