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Appreciative inquiry as a methodological approach to collaboration between different sporting organisations in Wales to promote physical literacy

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AIM

The aim of this study was for **university consultants** to apply and critically evaluate **Appreciative Inquiry (AI)** as a methodological approach to **collaboration** with the **national organisation for promoting sport and physical activity in Wales (NOS)**, a **Welsh national governing body (NGB)** for sport, and **a Welsh local authority (LA)** department responsible for sport and leisure, to develop a **physical literacy (PL) programme for primary schools.**

WHAT IS APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY (AI)?

AI is a **form of participatory action research** that enables a **focused and sensitised engagement** with participants to **co-construct knowledge and practices** that build on, rather than repair existing activities (Enright et al., 2014). The AI methodology is underpinned by the belief that **every culture has strengths that can be improved upon** and those strengths can and should be the **starting point for positive change.** The principles of AI enable **practitioners to take ownership** over the process of changing and developing practice, harnessing the **power of the collective** by directing focus and attention towards a **vision of 'what could be'** (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987).

PHASES OF AI

Three phases of an AI cycle; the **discovery phase**, the **dream phase**, and the **design phase** (Cooperrider et al., 2001) were the focus of this study, within which the **consultants (PLCs) acted as 'boundary spanners',** to **promote collaboration** between the different organisations, over a period of **six months.**

1 DISCOVERY PHASE

The purpose of this phase was to:

- Discover how the organisations **defined and understood** the meaning of **PL** and **how important** it was to them.

- Use **appreciative questioning** to gain a **greater understanding** of the **resources and practices** used by the **NGB** and the **LA** and how they **aligned with PL.**

- Identify **mutual strengths** across **all organisations** to build upon in the dream phase.

2 DREAM PHASE

The aim of this phase was to **identify 'what could be'** as a **collaborative plan** to **enhance PL.** The dream was then **proposed and further negotiated** in a **collaborative group meeting** with all the organisations present five months into the project.

3 DESIGN PHASE

The design phase was **developed in a collaborative group meeting** with specific **follow up actions for each organisation.** This AI conversation took place six months into the project and the follow-up actions took another month. The aim was to **develop ideas about how to achieve the dream**, focusing on **relationships**, **structures** and **processes** (Cooperrider et al., 2008).

FINDINGS
WHAT CAN BE LEARNED BY AN AI PROCESS?

Developing trust and positive relationships

Using appreciative questioning

Positive questioning was deemed essential in **building good relationships** to **gain trust and 'buy-in'** for the ensuing project, and to start from a **position of strength**, rather than weaknesses.

Representing other organisations positively

As a 'boundary spanner' it was imperative to be **constantly aware** of the possibility for the **different organisations to question** other's initiatives and **intervene regularly** to ensure that the other organisations were **represented in a positive light** during the early stages.

Dealing with different understanding and perceived value of physical literacy

It became apparent to the PLCs, **early in the discovery phase**, that the different **organisations** had **varying definitions of PL**. To encourage collaboration, they considered it important to **manage the intricacies of this.**

No judgement
The aim, here for the PLCs was not to judge individuals or organisations on their knowledge and understanding of the concept of PL but to discover what they knew and explore any misconceptions that would need to be addressed in the project. This was crucial baseline information to enable the consultancy team to meet their aim of promoting PL.

No comparisons
The important aspect for the PLCs was not to compare these different definitions between organisations, but to realise that they were the result of different levels of exposure to PL in the past. This information was considered important to guide the dream and design phases of the project.

Managing these different perceptions and values attached to PL was therefore an **additional complication for the PLCs** in the discovery phase. It was **imperative for them to set a positive tone about collaboration** and combined goals going into the dream phase of the project, to **promote joint ownership** of 'what could be'.

Promoting collaboration and a joint vision

Gaining an **agreed common definition** and understanding of PL, and a **clear set of goals** (Huxham & Vangen, 2000b), was challenging but critical to the success of the project. Collaboration was part of a clear agenda within the NOS and there was a **strong consensus** amongst the organisations that there needed to be **consistency** in the understanding and messaging around PL. There were **different initial understandings of PL**, and so the discovery phase involved some **re-education** for some organisations through the **distribution of PL literature**, adopting the work of Whitehead (2019). The project benefitted from the **collaborative discussions**, **goal setting** and **problem-solving** between organisations. The **agreed dream**, therefore, was to design a **PL resource and programme for primary schools**, culminating in a 'festival' event at their local leisure centre.

Negotiating the PL resource

Whilst the NOS was generally happy about developing a PL passport resource, however **they were mindful about the number of other similar resources** that were being developed by other NGBs. Nonetheless, the **resource was a key aspect of the dream** for the other collaborating organisations so a **compromise** had to be **negotiated** by the PLCs. Despite the agreement about the need for a PL resource to include a range of physical activities, there were **different visions** of what this might include. Whilst most wanted a range of activities from different individual sports, some also wanted to include a team sport. It was important at this early stage to **negotiate this disparity** to ensure the success of the project.

Strong Leadership

The **collaborative structures** of this study were often **complex, ambiguous and dynamic in nature**, resulting in **some challenges** for the PLCs convening them. The practical implications for conducting AI are that such approaches require **large amounts of resources** in the form of **energy**, **commitment**, **skill** and **nurturing** on the part of the leaders. AI requires **strong leadership** and nurturing to make it **effective and sustainable.**