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EXPLORING THE INTERACTION BETWEEN APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AND
STUDENT ACADEMIC OPTIMISM: AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

A Dissertation

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Doctor of Education

By

Gwendolyn Baugh Ashworth

May 2020

**EXPLORING THE INTERACTION BETWEEN APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY
AND STUDENT ACADEMIC OPTIMISM: AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY**

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Approved March 19, 2020 by

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Dedication

I would like to thank my partner, Tarpley Ashworth, for supporting and accepting my pursuit of this transformative academic journey, which officially began nine days after our wedding and is ending a month after our first child was born. To my daughter, Ryland Jane Ashworth, I hope to instill in you that love, hard work, and laughter are really all you need. Thank you for waiting for me to finish collecting my data before you arrived. To incredible friends, particularly Katherine Dunahoo Hudencial and Maria Dove Osinkosky, your guidance, support, and friendship are remarkable. To my colleagues at CodeRVA Regional High School, including Theresa Katz, Angela de Vega, Symone Sylvester, and Tracy Walker, thank you for support and assistance in completing this process. And to my grandparents, Harris and Edna Baugh and Thomas and Jean Dagenhart, and parents, Richard and Cathy Baugh, thank you for the sacrifices you have made and love that you have given that have allowed me to arrive at this moment. I promise to use the knowledge and skills I have developed to give back to others and pay it forward in the same way you have with me.

Table of Contents

iv

List of Tables

Abstract

The study's purpose was to examine the degree and manner in which students have experienced a climate of academic optimism in the setting. The study was intended to provide a means for student participants to reflect on the structures currently in place within the setting through the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) process. The study investigated three research questions. How does participation in the AI process influence students' perceptions of features of school climate, as measured by shifts in Student Academic Optimism (SAO) and outputs generated during the AI process in the school selected for the study? What themes emerged from participants in the Inquire phase of the AI process that support SAO? What action plans emerged based on the themes and provocative propositions created related to SAO during and in the 2 months following the AI process? The study utilized a convergent parallel mixed methods design to collect data from a quantitative survey on SAO, a qualitative survey on the AI process, and physical artifacts and audio recordings generated during the AI process. The study's findings revealed that: (a) the results of the survey on SAO were non-significant; (b) the AI process influenced student participants' perceptions of features of school climate, indicated through a myriad of outputs; (c) themes related to academic press were most common, followed by student trust in teachers, general school climate, and student identification with school; and (d) design statements and action plans related to academic press and student identification with school were generated.

EXPLORING THE INTERACTION BETWEEN APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AND

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

Each year, many jobs in computer science and coding-related fields go unfilled due to a lack of qualified applicants (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016; Microsoft, 2012). It is estimated that the Commonwealth of Virginia will have over 65,000 Computer Science and Information Technology jobs within the region by 2030, and that many will remain vacant based on the current rates of post-secondary matriculation (Chmura Economics and Analytics, 2016). This lack of trained workers is particularly pronounced among historically underserved populations, including ethnic and racial minorities, low socioeconomic groups, and women (Pew Research Center, 2018).

Tech High School (a pseudonym) was founded from a consortium of 14 school districts in Virginia to address the shortage of skilled workers in technology-related fields. This regional high school was created to meet three goals: design the high school experience to better meet students' learning needs; address racial, economic, and gender inequities in STEM-related education; and increase the pool of potential employees in computer science-related fields for regional and state employers in an effort to address a critical gap in the workforce.

While at school, students work on blended learning initiatives implemented in a manner that emphasizes personalized learning and provides autonomy to accelerate the pace of the content. This involves a combination of in-person and online instruction. In

the first two years of their high school experience, students are able to self-pace their completion of many high school diploma requirements. During the final two years, qualified students can complete dual enrollment courses for college credit. Some of these students can complete an Associate Degree of Science with a Specialization in Computer Science by the end of their high school tenure. In order to complete the requirements of the Associate Degree option, students have to opt-in and demonstrate proficiency on standardized community college placement tests in English and mathematics and complete course sequencing through Algebra III by the end of the summer following their sophomore year.

One aspect of the school's emphasis on technology-focused curriculum and instructional design to develop workplace readiness skills involves the way physical space is provided and utilized within the setting. A feature of the school that makes it distinctive is that of the open physical space that dominates the school's interior that allows for more intensive engagement among students and staff. Instead of large classrooms, teachers have smaller classroom spaces that comfortably hold eight to 10 students. When students are not scheduled in groups within the small classrooms, they are expected to receive online instruction through a laptop computer that is provided by the school while working in a large open space with assigned tables.

As the school continues in its third year, insight into the systems and structures currently in place within the setting are important as stakeholders seek to measure and improve the school's climate. Data collected on the current structures that provide students access to college credits and reward them for their academic, attendance, and discipline-related behaviors indicate that a disproportionate degree of students of color

are struggling to move forward within these parameters. These systems and structures are significant because they impact all facets on students' experiences at school, which is connected with the school's climate. The purpose of this study was to explore the degree to which structures within the school may have impacted the degree to which students experienced a climate of academic optimism, that is, trust in staff, academic press, and identification with school.

Statement of Action Research Problem

The problem explored in this action research study was how features of school climate within Tech High School interacted with the structures put in place to support the school's goals. To understand the current problem of school climate within this setting, it was important to understand the origins of the school and the internal structures it has created. During the first semester of the school's first year, staff noticed that many of the students were unable to demonstrate engagement and focus while in the open space. At that time, the staff met with students from varying academic and grade levels to create a system that provided a solution to these issues that would reward students who demonstrated achievement and provide greater structure to those who did not. The intention of the system that was created was that students who were not currently demonstrating proficient levels of achievement would be more motivated to do so due to directly observing and being impacted by those who were demonstrating such levels of achievement and thus had more freedoms and privileges. Students were assigned a designation or status based on their current attendance, behaviors, grades, and progress in their courses. There are three designations for students: Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), Vice Presidents (VPs), and Managers. Each of these titles held a varying degree of

privileges. CEOs had autonomy over where they sit at all times and receive additional field trip and enrichment experiences. VPs were able to choose where they sit for one quarter of their day and are otherwise assigned to seats in a specific area. Managers had assigned seats throughout their day and sit as a group in a different area. The structure was meant to replicate an upward mobility reward and promotion system that can be found in professional careers. Attendance, behavior, progress, and work performance were all criteria in which real-world workers were commonly evaluated. The current design emphasized behavior modification, satisfactory work performance, and student accountability. The data informing students' titles were pulled every six weeks, with seven intervals throughout the school year.

A concern arose, however, that the reward and promotion structure may have perpetuated or reproduced inequality by being correlated with race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or student ability. This structure may have contributed to a problematic climate within the school in ways that worked against the school's goal of reducing the isolation of historically underserved populations. The way students gain access to college credit-bearing courses through the Associate Degree program was another structure that may have upheld or created further disproportionality among students.

The interaction between the respective structures and systems put in place to meet the school's goals may have unintentionally created issues related to features of school climate within the setting. These and other structures contributed to students' experiences of school climate, but how and to what extent was not known. The interaction of the

school's goals and features of school climate provided valuable information for future high school redesign considerations as well as best practices within this setting.

Evidence Supporting the Existence of the Problem

The school was in its third year of existence when the study took place. The school employed an outside research consortium during its first two years to collect data on how the school's systems and practices reflected its goals. Data collected during the second school year indicated that the current structure, including the hierarchical reward structure, has not led to improved achievement among all students. Further, although students who demonstrated proficient achievement levels attained privileges, it was not known if these privileges were a motivating factor for their achievement. These findings conveyed possible issues of concern related to school climate at Tech High School. Some staff and other relevant stakeholders within the setting had expressed concerns that the reward and promotion structure unintentionally reproduced an economic class structure. Although the reward system was intended to generate motivation for all students to see higher levels of autonomy, the data revealed that nearly half of students (47.9%) maintained Manager status throughout the school's second year. Within this group, a disproportionate number of students were Black or Hispanic.

Probable Causes Related to the Problem

Possible factors related to the problem noted above included a lack of attention regarding features of school climate, a lack of awareness of equitable best practices among staff and students, as well as a lack of relevant research about the issues discussed as they related to the school's open-space design.

The reward and promotion system was structured in a way that may have fostered potential social divisions that reproduced inequalities and undermined student body cohesiveness and inclusiveness among students based on their academic, attendance, and behavioral outputs. It is important for staff to have created an environment that supported positive identity development for every student. This type of environment would allow each student to feel a sense of belonging and ownership within the school and will also align with best practices related to equity.

Because of the innovative and unique nature of the school, minimal research existed on secondary settings that feature the school's goals. While there are studies related to career readiness, personalized learning, and STEM-related curricula and schools, none that I found encompassed a structural redesign similar to Tech High School. It was difficult to ascertain features of school climate within redesigned high schools and how they may be improved or hindered. This dearth of research made it more difficult for staff and other stakeholders within the setting to have appropriate and empirical check points regarding best practices. The information I reported about students' data and perceptions originated from the school's internal documents and personal communication.

Context of the Action Research Study

The proposed study took place at Tech High School, a regional public high school in a mid-Atlantic state that focused on Computer Science. The region where the high school operates had been historically influenced by issues of racial, economic, and policy structures that have failed to champion access, inclusivity, and equity (Bradley vs. School Board of City of Richmond, 1974). Districts within the region had experienced varying

degrees of ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic segregation in schools within and among respective school districts (Corning et al., 2018). Comprehending the unique nature of the high school was critical to addressing the problems of practice described in this study.

The population of Tech High School is comprised of 254 students. The demographics of the high school reflect those of the region, with 51.4% qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch. In terms of race, 55.9% identified as White, 39% identified as Black, 2.8% identified as Multiracial, 1.7% identified as Asian, and 0.6% identified as Pacific Islander. Among the students, 47% were female and 53% were male, while 18.1% were known to have an identified disability. The school currently employs 30 staff members. Teachers are assigned content-specific courses and students are enrolled in courses based on previous course completion. Student services staff work to correctly place students and assist them with management and organizational skills relevant to the distinctive learning environment of the school. It should be noted that the information reported about students' data and perceptions originated from the school's internal documents and personal communication.

The primary stakeholders of Tech High School are the students, parents/guardians, staff, and board members that comprise the immediate school community. These persons are most directly impacted by the policies, planning, leadership, and other processes within the school. As a regional high school, students at Tech High School come from 14 districts within the region. Tech High School is overseen by a board of 14, one member for each of the 14 partnering school boards within the region. These members set and uphold policy, including the constitution and bylaws, governance and operations, instruction, and student conduct. The board meets

quarterly at the high school during the school day. This enables them to directly observe the school in action. Additional stakeholders include the former and current Governors in the state, the highest-ranking education officials in the state, a variety of industry partners, and multiple local community colleges and universities. These persons and entities are considered stakeholders because they invested resources into the welfare and success of the school.

The Intervention

The Appreciating Inquiry (AI) process provides a strengths-based model for cultivating change. This involves identifying strengths and considering options in order to move forward from challenges and bring visions to life (M. Tschannen-Moran & B. Tschannen-Moran, 2011). In this study, the AI process is intended to serve as an intervention for connecting students with measurable changes in school climate variables. AI is an organizational improvement tool intended to foster change by focusing on strengths, assets, and collaboration in an effort to find the best in the people, the organization, and the community of focus (Cooperrider & Fry, 2012). AI is unique from other methods of organizational improvement and data collection because of its approach. Specifically, change is enacted through strengths-based exploration and intentional structure for collaboration regarding create possibilities and social innovation (Cooperrider et al., 2008).

The AI process is potentially viable considering the context of the setting because of its emphasis on taking what already exists and improving it, rather than focusing on weaknesses. This aligns with the overlap among the structures and systems put in place to support the school's goals, as all three goals require certain supports to move forward.

9

The focus of the study is to assess if a significant difference in school climate emerges after an AI process involving students occurs, and what perceptions, themes, and subsequent plans and action steps emerge from this process. This study is intended to measure if utilizing the AI process results in measurable changes in features of school climate, specifically the elements that comprise Student Academic Optimism (SAO): student trust in teachers, academic press, and student identification with school, and to discern significant aspects of participants' experience with the process. These features are important as stakeholders and other interested parties seek to capture school climate and create self-determined change in an environment that organically provides students with greater levels of educational and social autonomy. M. Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran (2011) explored the interaction between the AI process and school climate in a longitudinal study in a small urban school district and utilized elements of SAO from the teacher perspective. Examining students' perceptions of these features of school climate through the lens of SAO before and after the AI process will elucidate the potential of this pairing for fostering change with issues related to school climate.

During the AI process, four phases took place: initiate, inquire, imagine, and innovation. The first phase involved acquainting an advisory group with AI theory as well as the structure and purpose of the experience. The second phase provided space for participants to share individual experiences related to the subconstructs of SAO and reflect on these in their larger participant groups. During the third phase, participant student groups worked together to develop and design creative expressions and aspirational statements that provided a grounded vision regarding the group's intended outcomes related to features of SAO within their school. Lastly, in the fourth phase,

participant student groups discussed and made plans to take action using their design

statements as a guide for their intended next steps. Five participant groups experienced

one session a week for four weeks. Through this action research study I hoped to provide

students with opportunities to cooperate and collaborate with their peers and staff about

existing realities and possible solutions related to school climate improvement.

Theoretical Framework

During the past 60 years, school climate has become more recognized as an

important aspect of the school experience (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009).

School climate, or the quality and character of school life, has emerged as an area of

growing interest in terms of school improvement (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral,

2009; Thapa et al., 2013). Positive school climate has been linked to students' academic

achievement across socioeconomic backgrounds, while negative school climate has been

shown to reduce student learning (Chen & Weikart, 2008; M. Tschannen-Moran et al.,

2006). While current measures of school climate continue to evolve, little research

currently exists on features of school climate as they relate to using and engaging

stakeholders to create self-determined change.

SAO is a means for measuring school climate by assessing certain climate

variables from the students' perspective (M. Tschannen-Moran et al., 2013). SAO is a

composite variable that is computed by measuring three sub-constructs: student trust in

teachers, students' perceptions of academic press, and their identification with school.

Higher degrees of SAO have been connected with greater levels of student achievement

across socioeconomic demographics (M. Tschannen-Moran et al., 2013).

Student trust in teachers is the extent to which a student trusts an educator they

11

interact with. Research has shown that this interaction is reciprocal and reliant on the degree an educator trusts a student (C. M. Adams & Forsyth, 2009). Student trust in teachers was not previously examined at Tech High School.

The subconstruct of academic press within SAO measures a school's quest for academic excellence (Hoy & Miskel, 2005). Data previously collected at Tech High School related to features of academic press identified that students tended to define "academic performance" based on how it was measured in the school rather than by standardized testing scores (Corning et al., 2018). Students recognized progress and grades as the primary components that determined their academic performance, but were aware that neither of these factors necessarily demonstrated content mastery.

The subconstruct of student identification with school within SAO measures a student's sense of belonging. In terms of student identification with school, prior research at Tech High School indicated that students felt a sense of belonging at school but not a strong sense of school pride (Corning et al., 2018). Because prior grades and test scores were not taken into account in the admission process to gain entry into the school when they applied to it, some students expressed their lack of pride in terms of attending the school. Among students, the quality of self-management was determined to be a foundational aspect in terms of their collective identity (Corning et al., 2018).

SAO and AI

As school leaders work to improve school climate, it is important they employ methods that are contextually relevant and effective at creating change. The subconstructs of SAO are affirmative in origin and seek to measure the existence of positive experiences of students within their school environment. Similarly, AI is a process used

for organizational planning and development that highlights positive traits within systems

in an effort to foster self-determined change and cooperatively search for the best

qualities in the people within a setting (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). Recognition

and valuing are employed within the four components of the "4 I" AI cycle: Inquire,

Imagine, Innovate, and Implement (Cooperrider et al., 2003). Although past research on

AI within certain educational settings has occurred (Calabrese et al., 2010; M.

Tschannen-Moran & B. Tschannen-Moran, 2011), only a few studies exist that attempt to

connect AI to school climate from the students' perspective. Willoughby and Tosey

(2007) found that AI was useful within a school community in terms of its ability to assist

stakeholders in decision-making, which in turn emphasize positive, democratic values

within the environment. This study also recognized the difficulty student participants had

in terms of reflecting consciously on the emotional and cultural experiences within their

school setting.

This action research study sought to provide insight into how the AI process

engaged students participants and influenced school climate, as measured by SAO. It was

anticipated that the results would inform school leaders, staff, and other stakeholders

about whether and how the AI process benefited students who participated. Ultimately, a

strong potential utility between SAO and AI existed. Both focused on improving

outcomes, positive attitudes, and the importance social and relational interactions. Their

alignment presented an opportunity to fill an existing gap in current research where both

of these respective processes converged. By participating in the AI process, students were

given an intentional space and structure to frame and reconstitute features of SAO within

their setting.

Applying AI to school settings also holds salient potential from an educational planning standpoint. School leaders are taught to employ effective planning by considering all components within a system (Senge, 2006). Both systems-thinking and AI assert that stakeholders can develop greater awareness and cultivate change. Important implications were found to exist by using AI and SAO within a research context as well. The findings can guide or repurpose systems-level frameworks used by school leaders. It should be noted, however, that the primary stakeholders that participated in the study were students who had limited power within the organizational structure. Additionally, student participants may have gained greater insight into the power of collaboration and strengths-based actions as agents of change. Ultimately, AI provided an effective means for leveraging action and change.

Assessing SAO within a school setting provides a demonstrated way for leaders to empirically determine the degree to which features of school climate exist in a school setting and how amenable they are to change. Because the setting of Tech High School has a wide spectrum of students with varying demographic backgrounds, and because one of its goals is to engage students who have historically been underrepresented, the selection of SAO to measure school climate is also appropriate. Knowledge of SAO, coupled with the use of a strengths-based tool such as AI, provided a unique lens for determining if and in what ways school climate was impacted by the experience of an AI process that inquired into the three components of SAO.

Action Research Questions

      The purpose of the study was to inform stakeholders about the impact of the AI process on SAO in an effort to discern best practices related to improving school climate. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How does participation in the AI process influence students' perceptions of features of school climate, as measured by shifts in SAO and outputs generated during the AI process in the school selected for the study?

2. What themes emerged from participants in the Inquire phase of the AI process that support SAO? What themes emerged from participants in an AI process that support SAO?

3. What action plans emerged based on the themes and design statements created related to SAO during and in the two months following the AI process?

Definitions of Terms

Academic Press-the degree to which a school is motivated by academic achievement. This is an environment where high, achievable academic goals are set and clearly understood by students, an orderly and serious learning environment exist, students are motivated to work hard, and students respect academic achievement (Hoy & Miskel, 2005).

Appreciative Inquiry-a strengths-based organizational tool that seeks to engage stakeholders in self-determined change. It is a process that highlights positive traits within systems in an effort to foster self-determined change (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010).

School Climate-the quality and character of school life, including norms, values, and

expectations, as well as the attitudes educators uphold. It is based on patterns of

students' experiences of school life and references a collective rather than

individual experience (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009).

Student Academic Optimism-an aggregate of the subconstructs of student trust in

teachers, academic press, and student identification with school (M. Tschannen-

Moran et al., 2013).

Student Identification with School-the degree in which students experience a sense of

belonging within their learning environment. Students with high degrees of

identification feel connected to their school and value the school and related goals

(M. Tschannen-Moran et al., 2013).

Student Trust in Teachers-the degree in which a student trusts an educator they interact

with. This is reciprocal in that it is heavily contingent on the degree in which an

educator trusts a student (C. M. Adams & Forsyth, 2009).

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

When examining the influence of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) on Student Academic

Optimism (SAO), a strong understanding of the relevant research and components that

comprised this interaction is important. It is essential for school leaders to explore

potential options in order to determine the most effective ways to improve school climate.

This literature review presents a summary of theoretical foundations and practical

implications of SAO, school climate, and AI.

SAO

SAO is a construct that conceptualizes school climate through measurement of

three subconstructs: students' trust in teachers, academic press, and identification with

school (M. Tschannen-Moran et al., 2013). The three sets of perceptions assessed through

SAO have been linked to student achievement (M. Tschannen-Moran et al., 2013).

Reflecting on the origins of SAO further highlights the potential it holds as a measure of

school climate that can lead to actionable change.

Theoretical Foundations of Academic Optimism

Before SAO was explored, the concept of academic optimism was conceived

based on research exploring teachers' perceptions of organizational characteristics within

schools. Specifically, inquiry into climate factors within schools produced an awareness

of certain variables of significance: faculty trust in parents and students, academic press,

and collective teacher efficacy (Hoy et al., 2006). Together,

these variables were found to contribute to a positive educational climate and to be strong predictors for student achievement (Hoy et al., 2006).

Faculty Trust in Parents and Students. Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) defined faculty trust in parents and students as an integrated concept. In their conceptualization, faculty trust is a willingness to be vulnerable to another person based on the confidence that that person embodies the five facets. The facets of benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness were found to contribute to trust (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; M. Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). The first subconstruct of SAO, students' trust in teachers, is connected with safety. Without consistent safe spaces to learn and interact, students are unable to develop trust in their teachers (Mitchell et al., 2018).

Academic Press. Academic press (also referred to as academic emphasis) is the degree to which students in a school are motivated by academic achievement (Hoy et al., 1991). Goddard et al. (2001) reported this as an environment where high, achievable academic goals were set and clearly understood by students, an orderly and serious learning environment existed, students were motivated to work hard, and students respected academic achievement. In order for high degrees of academic press to occur, students must experience a learning environment that is orderly, where their achievement is positively recognized by their peers, and where they are not distracted by issues related to safety. Ultimately, a setting with a high degree of academic emphasis influences collective norms, which in turn impact individual norms (M. Tschannen-Moran et al., 2013).

Collective Teacher Efficacy. The theoretical underpinnings of Collective

Teacher Efficacy stem from Albert Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory. While

teacher self-efficacy is defined as perceptions of personal efficacy regarding ability to

influence student learning, collective teacher efficacy is based on the collective

perceptions of the faculty about their professional capabilities as a whole, regardless of

the environmental factors impacting their students (M. Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004).

Theoretical Foundations of SAO

In recent years, the construct of AO has been utilized to explore student

perceptions of a similar set of variables. Much of SAO is philosophically founded in AO.

The importance of student attitudes related to school has been connected to student

investment in learning as well as long-term achievement growth (Ladd & Dinella, 2009).

Like AO, SAO measures the constructs of trust and perceptions of academic press.

Rather than measuring for collective efficacy, however, SAO explores the extent to

which students identify with their school setting.

M. Tschannen-Moran et al. (2013) determined the existence of a latent variable,

SAO, through a confirmatory factor analysis of student trust in teachers, academic press,

and student identification with school. SAO is a construct that measures these variables

and has been found to predict variance in student achievement (M. Tschannen-Moran et

al., 2013). The three subconstructs of SAO are distinguished from other features of

school climate because individually and in the aggregate, they have been found to explain

variance in student achievement even when controlling for students' socioeconomic

backgrounds (M. Tschannen-Moran et al., 2013).

School climate is complex and multidimensional; this is due in part to its connectedness to healthy relationships, students' identification with schools, and dropout prevention (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009; Koth et al., 2008). It is important to acknowledge that it is through the patterns of stakeholders' interactions within their school life that school climate exists (Villenas & Zelinksi, 2018). School climate is a construct of significance for school leaders because of its connection with academic, behavioral, and social outcomes (Koth et al., 2008; Maxwell et al., 2017; Thapa et al., 2013). Although a single, universally agreed-upon definition of school climate does not exist, certain aspects of school climate have been consistently recognized. Villenas and Zelinski (2018) recommended that school climate be considered in terms of its norms, values, and expectations that support social, emotional, and physical safety while acknowledging that each stakeholder within a school environment contributes to these experiences. Various other studies have organized these factors across themes of academic emphasis, interpersonal relationships within school settings, and collective norms, goals, and values related to behaviors (Koth et al., 2008; Maxwell et al., 2017; M. Tschannen-Moran et al., 2013).

SAO was selected as the variable of school-climate inquiry for this study because it represents features of school climate in the context of four of the five school climate dimensions identified by Thapa et al. (2013), which are safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and institutional environment. Though a variety of school climate-related measures exist, SAO is dynamic because of its connection with academic achievement among students from varying socioeconomic backgrounds (Tschannen-Moran, 2013). This reality increased the utility of SAO when considering the importance of closing the

achievement gap and the degree in which educational inequities continue to impact students from historically underserved populations.

      Safety. Ultimately, feeling safe is a basic human need that enhances student learning as well as prosocial development (Devine & Cohen, 2007). The dimension of safety is connected with student trust in teachers, as a foundation of trust must exist between respective parties within an environment for stakeholders to have confidence in safety procedures and for relationships to positively evolve (Mitchell et al., 2018). Safety as an aspect of school climate includes rules and norms as well as physical and socioemotional supports to allow for the well-being of students (Cohen, Pickeral, & McCloskey, 2009). Legislative policies continue to bolster more physical and psychological measures that create safe conditions for students to learn (Timm, 2015). These should involve intentional planning and implementation of initiatives and structures that reinforce students' sense of safety while at school.

      Relationships. Relationships between stakeholders are an essential driver for learning to take place within a school. The extent to which stakeholders feel connected to one another contributes to positive occurrences within learning environments (Thapa et al., 2013). Positive relationships allow for students, teachers, and other stakeholders to engage in collaboration and valuing behaviors. These interactions may lead to shared decision-making and peer norms linked to learning. Schools that are participatory, caring, responsive, and safe provide better structures for learning (Blum et al., 2002). Relationships are a founding component of two subconstructs of SAO, student trust in teachers and student identification with school.

Teaching and Learning. The interplay between teaching and learning is inherently relational. This dimension includes the quality of instruction, the inclusion of social, emotional, and ethical learning, professional development for instructors, and leadership (Cohen, Pickeral, & McCloskey, 2009; Thapa et al., 2013). The quality of instruction involves setting high expectations for student achievement and providing assistance and praise when needed and merited. It is important to connect learning to real life, employ engaging materials, and provide opportunities for participation and creativity. Through social, emotional, and ethical learning, students with diverse cognitive abilities, experiences, and needs feel appreciated and valued. Leadership involves providing a compelling and clearly articulated vision, being available and supportive, and recognizing personnel. The dimension of teaching and learning is directly aligned with academic press, because for teaching and learning to be maximized, academics should be emphasized in a significant way within a setting. School connectedness and engagement are important components of the dimension of institutional environment and are also relevant to student identification with school, another subconstruct of SAO.

Institutional Environment. Institutional environment involves two primary aspects. The first is that of school connectedness and engagement, which is similar to student identification with school because both emphasize a student's sense of belonging. The second aspect is that of the physical framework and surrounding of the school, its resources, and its supplies. School connectedness is "the belief by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as them as individuals" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009, p. 3).

Summary. The components of SAO are significant to school leaders in terms of their relevance to present issues schools face. Their predictive power has been demonstrated in longitudinal studies, which speaks to the challenging nature of changing school climate (Brand et al., 2008; Hoy et al., 1998). It was important to recognize these elements when considering options for evaluating features of school climate because they provide objective and empirically-based possible entry-points for improving school climate.

Practical Relevance of SAO

As school leaders work to improve school climate, they should employ methods that are contextually relevant and effective at creating change. It is important to recognize that how school climate is defined impacts how it is measured. The multi-faceted nature of SAO made it a viable tool for examining school climate factors.

Student Trust in Teachers. Trust is an invaluable component of meaningful school improvement. Bryk and Schneider (2002) found schools to be reliant on the relationships of those within the setting and the quality of those interactions. Recognizing the interconnectedness of the relationships between students, faculty, and parents provides school leaders with a road map for improving these interactions. C. M. Adams and Forsyth (2009) determined that student trust in teachers was heavily contingent on the degree to which teachers trusted students. This reciprocal relationship is significant because it provides an entry point for school leaders seeking to improve student trust in teachers. School leaders can begin by working with teachers to improve their trust in students, which holds the potential to enhance trust between both parties. Additionally,

day-to-day social exchanges between members of a school community can improve achievement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Student Perceptions of Academic Press. Academic press also holds many practical implications for school leaders. Certain intangibles contribute to a school's quest for academic excellence, or academic press (Goddard et al., 2001). The degree of academic press within a learning environment is similar to trust in that the daily interactions between students, faculty, and parents play a role in the extent of the efficacy of these constructs. Thus, school leaders must work with faculty on their beliefs, actions, and procedures in order to improve this variable within their setting (Goddard et al., 2001).

Student Identification with School. Student identification with school is of practical significance to school leaders as well. Emotional and physical withdrawal is a problem within many schools. This pattern includes a lack of motivation, interest, and positive school values (Voelkl, 1997). These realities can lead to negative behaviors such as truancy, absenteeism, and dropping out of school, as well as the existence of weapons, drugs, and violent behavior on school grounds. Awareness of the subconstruct of student identification with school allows stakeholders to measure and implement improvement initiatives based on data-driven decision-making and programming.

Research Findings on School Climate

School climate impacts a myriad of interactions and occurrences within school settings and the greater community. In recent years, the United States Department of Education and the Center for Disease Control are among the agencies that have demonstrated a growing interest in reform related to school climate, including violence

24

and bullying prevention (Thapa et al., 2013). This is evidenced by 49 states passing

bullying prevention laws (Thapa et al., 2013). Policymakers continue to be asked to

support school climate improvement for the sake of student's experiencing a prosocial

education and the multitude of associated prevention factors (Brown & Elias, 2012). To

improve school climate, policymakers at the state and local levels have the ability to

bolster school climate improvement by taking legislative actions. This could include

funding and implementing research-based programming related to improving the

dimensions of school climate.

A growing body of research conveys the connection between student learning,

student well-being, and school climate. Positive school climate is correlated with lower

student absenteeism and suspension rates at the middle and high school levels (Lee et al.,

2011). Students have been found to be less aggressive and experience less bullying and

harassment when they experience higher degrees of positive school climate (Attar-

Schwartz, 2009).

School climate is important because it has been found to have a significant

influence on students' mental and physical health. The interaction between psychological

vulnerabilities of students and their perceptions of school climate may explain the

appearance of behavioral and emotional issues during the onset of adolescence

(Kuperminic et al., 2001). These include problems with behavior, attendance, disrespect,

and drops in academic achievement. The frequency with which students experience

substance abuse and psychiatric challenges is also related to school climate, with those

experiencing higher rates of these problems displaying lower levels of a perceived

positive school climate (LaRusso et al., 2008). Effective risk prevention and health

promotion have been linked with school climate and found to be positively correlated with school settings that are safe, caring, and responsive, effective prevention occurs (Blum et al., 2002).

Although there is not one widely regarded measure or practice for improving school climate, specific experiences that promote a positive school climate that focuses on learning have been determined. An example of this is creating a supportive learning environment within a school. Another example is that of intentional, systematic approaches to safety and positive behavior within a school setting. Both are connected with positive, healthy relationships and trust among stakeholders. Using data to uphold standards and measures that drive improvement are also important aspects of the school climate improvement process because it indicates strengths and deficiencies in the programming that exists (Cohen, Pickeral, & McCloskey, 2009).

Overall, students, faculty, and parents need to be aligned in behaviors involving encouraging, supporting, recognizing, and rewarding academic achievement of students (Alig-Mielcarek & Hoy, 2005). The interconnectedness of these relationships is essential for high degrees of academic press to be established and maintained. These implications are important for school leaders as they emphasize school climate as a building block empirically connected to academic achievement regardless of students' socioeconomic demographics (M. Tschannen-Moran et al., 2013).

One aspect about school climate that has relevance for this study is that school climate is considered to be a relatively enduring feature of schools that is notoriously difficult to change (Hoy & Miskel, 2005). This idea presents a challenge given the fairly short timeline of this study. Contrastingly, a longitudinal study over two years of an

underperforming school district found that measurable changes in school climate and trust did occur through the AI process (M. Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2011).

AI

Using the process of AI to inquire into SAO provided a platform to investigate the impact AI could have within an educational setting. Outcomes provided an opportunity for school leaders to foster change in a positive way. Together, these conveyed the potential of AI as a tool for positively affecting SAO.

Theoretical Foundations of AI

AI is an organizational development tool that uses a strengths-based approach (Coghlan et al., 2003). AI is based on the notion that individuals have unique traits and attitudes that can most effectively improve systems when focusing on assets and affirmation (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). Traditionally, organizations emphasize the insights and opinions of those in monetary, hierarchical, or situational power in a manner that often does not adequately considerer those most directly and frequently impacted by decisions (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010).

AI was originally created as a tool for organizational research (Cooperrider et al., 2008). It has evolved into a process with transformational capacities beyond traditional organizational development processes, in part due to its unique approach. AI focuses less than most organizational tools and data analysis methods on corrective or reforming processes. Like AO, AI is philosophically rooted in positive psychology, or the belief that people desire to lead meaningful lives, improve and maximize their capacities, and enhance their experiences of love, work, and play (Frederickson, 2011).

27

There are five fundamental principles of AI that work simultaneously and are connected with one another: the positive, constructionist, simultaneity, anticipatory, and poetic principles (Cooperrider et al., 2008; B. Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2010). The positive principle focuses on channeling resources in an effort to emphasize strengths-based capacities that lead to change processes (Watkins et al., 2011). The constructionist principle highlights that participants socially construct, and thus make meaning, through their interactions. In acknowledging this, the importance of participants engaging in positive exchanges with one another is emphasized.

The principle of simultaneity focuses on the idea that by engaging positively, we concurrently create greater degrees of positivity within our organization and community and in doing so create change (M. Adams, 2004). Similarly, just like positive interactions lead to other, reciprocal positive interactions, when participants anticipate a positive exchange or future experience, they are reinvigorated to give positively within that context. This is known as the anticipatory principle (Watkins et al., 2011). Lastly, the poetic principle asserts that participants' motive is important. If they are positive in their aim, they will be more likely to inspire and motivate others and to highlight the capacities that do exist (Watkins et al., 2011).

In addition to these core principles, three emergent principles or intentions have evolved as the AI process has grown as an empirically founded tool (Fitzgerald et al., 2010). The awareness principle emphasizes that when are intentionally mindful and aware with ourselves and others, we are more capable of utilizing this insight to better comprehend how we relate to others. This in turn allows us to better apply our learning to reframing our actions and behaviors. The enactment principle holds that in being

28

authentic, we are able to align with our future wishes and desires. In doing so, we are able to better ensure our behaviors are more effectively arranged with our goals and dreams. Lastly, the wholeness principle stipulates that we do not exist in isolation and are continually contributing to a greater whole, or community. This principle emphasizes that every person has something to contribute to the whole group and speaks to the need for the AI process to engage the whole system (Fitzgerald et al., 2010).

AI provides an alternative route to systems improvement, employing discovery and cooperation in an effort to renew small and large groups, organizations, and communities (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010; Watkins et al., 2011). Systems thinking contends that no outsiders or bystanders exist within an organization, as all possess value within and outside of their interconnectedness (Senge, 2006). Instead, systems thinking is a framework for seeing wholes. AI provides a framework for systems-level change. It varies from other models of organizational improvement due to its roots in positivity and adopting a strengths-based perspective. Both systems thinking and AI assert that it is essential for entities within a setting to come together and collaborate. In doing so, new information is created and greater depth of knowledge occurs.

Various structures around the AI process have been explored. In this review, two common AI models will be discussed, including the "Five D" model and the "Four I" model. The Four I model was used in this study.

AI initially was employed using a four-stage model: discovery, dream, design, and destiny (Whitney & Cooperrider, 1998). The model later transitioned to using the "Five-D cycle" which added defining the focal points of change before the discovery process was to begin. The cycle begins with defining the focus of the process. This

29

provides clarity as well as purpose, content, and desired outcomes. Once this exposition

has occurred, discovery takes place. This is led by affirmative conversations in an effort

to determine the most optimal characteristics and actions that have developed within the

system of inquiry with the intention of gathering rich collective wisdom. From here,

dreaming is employed to determine what is most optimally desired. This reflects the

intended pathway(s) toward progress. Designing takes place next and which involves

brainstorming and specifying the steps needed to bring the desired change to life. Destiny

is the final phase of the cycle and is where changes within the organization occur. This is

done through execution of the actionable processes previously selected and is intended to

occur via organization skill and systemic application (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010).

The "Four-I" cycle of AI is similar to the Five-D model, but uses a different set of

descriptors. It begins with initiating, or framing the purpose of the AI process, including

what topic(s) will be explored as well as the methods. Inquiring, or phase two, involves

participants sharing in pairs their peak experience within the organization, values, and

wishes around the area of focus, and then share their findings with the larger group.

During the third phase, imagining, groups develop a vision for the future of the

organization. Lastly, innovating allows participants to use their prior successes and

visions to create design statements. The purpose of this experience is to connect

information and perceptions on what currently is to what can be and to encourage

participants to celebrate and take action on the outputs of their collaboration efforts

(Cooperrider et al., 2003).

Practical Implications of AI

The school environment provides a unique setting for AI. The AI process provides an intentional and empirically supported means for engaging stakeholders in educational development without focusing on deficits. At its core, AI asks participants to focus on what gives life to an experience. This question is aligned with the purpose of education, which is to create learning.

Prior research has explored AI within other school settings. In one study using AI at the district level, it was suggested that engaged leadership and buy-in among participants related to the focus of the AI process lead to greater transformation (Bushe, 2008). Other researchers using AI found that students across elementary and secondary levels sought teachers that displayed genuine interest in them as people and were able to relate to them personally (Nesje & Nesje, 2007). Positive climate changes and improvements to the academic environment were the focus of another study in a high school setting, which found that through the use of AI, students connected better with one another and in their academic motivation (Calabrese et al., 2008). In 2009, state-level stakeholders in New York utilized AI to create a vision for inclusive services for students with disabilities (Calabrese et al., 2008). Additional research on applying the use of the AI process for strategic planning for students with disabilities conveyed that AI produced organizational learning, fostered individual and collective analysis, allowed time and space for participants to engage in positive dialogue, strategic thinking, and future planning (Ruhlman, 2014). This resulted in a map for other school systems to create more inclusive environments and practices through self-reflection and organizational assessment.

AI has been previously utilized to creative positive, democratic cultural ideals in a school setting. Willoughby and Tosey (2007) conducted the first known AI study within a school environment on a large scale. They found a connection between an increased opportunity for student voices to be heard and the AI process, as well as potential for AI to be used as a tool for school improvement. Dole et al. (2014a) found a strong degree of leadership, partnership, and sponsorship among those implementing an AI process were connected to climate-related successes in school environments. Additionally, staff members found power and success in a district-level AI process due to their ability to integrate their personal, organizational, and communal experiences to improve climate (Dole et al., 2014b).

M. Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran (2011) explored the AI processes within an underperforming school district. In this longitudinal study, the researchers found measurable improvement on the majority of the climate and trust variables assessed. Although similar overlapping concepts are found in M. Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran (2011) and my study, the former did not utilize SAO in their study. Components of AO were imbedded in the study, although not from the student perspective.

Willoughby and Tosey (2007) used a core team of 12 students and four staff to implement the AI process. They were able to generate maximum involvement, with all students and staff within the school participating in AI interviews and/or small groups that focused on the wishes of participants. The school improvement process is relevant to AI because of its alignment with contemporary themes across literature within this area, including self-evaluation, capacity-building, and distributive leadership (Willoughby &

Tosey, 2007). The school improvement process is also the fifth element of school climate identified by Thapa et al. (2013). Specifically, schools with a high degree of relational trust have been found to make changes in an effort to improve academic achievement with greater frequency (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). There are four systems that act reciprocally to improve school settings: professional capacity; order, safety, and norms; parent-school-community ties; and instructional guidance (Bryk & Al, 2010). There is overlap between these systems and aspects of school climate. Specifically, both encompass safety and institutional environments and structures. A feature of safety is that of student trust in teachers, one of the subconstructs of SAO. Two subconstructs of SAO are aligned with the school improvement process. Student trust in teachers connects directly with safety, while order and norms are important to intentional structures put in place to promote academic press.

As previously mentioned, assessing school climate has been utilized as a means for structuring the school improvement process (Cohen, Pickeral, & McCloskey, 2009; Thapa et al., 2013). The AI process provides a viable tool for enhancing school improvement procedures because of its versatility. Specifically, it may emphasize whatever aspects of their collective work organizational participants deem would meet their needs. Like features of school climate, AI cannot be utilized as a one size fits all tool. Instead, school leaders, researchers, and other stakeholders can apply its flexible nature to a variety of situations as a means to improve schools.

Summary

The process of AI provided a framework for inquiry into its potential impact on students within their school setting. This summary of literature adds to previous

overviews on or related to school climate, SAO and AI, and provided a space for understanding how these may interact in a capacity that benefits our understanding of how to improve school climate. Only through intentional research can equitable practices become coherently actualized in a systemic way. This research provided a platform for school leaders to gain a clearer and more inclusive lens into potential means for improving school climate.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to explore Appreciate Inquiry (AI) as an approach

for improving features of school climate. This was assessed by measuring Student

Academic Optimism (SAO) with a quantitative survey before, immediately after, and two

months following the AI process, as well as through a qualitative open-ended survey

immediately after and two months following the AI process and through the collection

and analyses of physical artifacts and audio recordings during the AI process. In order to

determine the changes student participants want that relate to features of school climate,

student participants engaged in the "4-I" cycle of the AI process, which will be explained

later in the chapter. I determined the degree of SAO of student participants at three

different intervals, as well as the themes and plans that emerged from the AI process and

participant perceptions of that process. Participant perceptions also acknowledged

students' thoughts on the extent to which school staff and other stakeholders valued their

ideas. This was done in an effort to develop a specific understanding of how student

participants perceived AI as a method for improving features of school climate. Chapter

three presents the procedures and methods utilized in this study.

Rationale for Choosing Action Research

This study was grounded in the pragmatic worldview, which focuses on

measuring an assortment of data and making subsequent decisions that are data-informed

and solutions-focused (Creswell, 2014). This perspective holds that a variety of ways to

understand the world exist, and thus no single perspective conveys a holistic picture of reality (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2004). In order to collect an assortment of data, the pragmatic paradigm advocates for the use of a mixed-methods approach to data collection. The mixed-method design allows the researcher to align data collection procedures based on the purpose of their study and uses both qualitative and quantitative data (Creswell, 2014). This approach allowed for a more comprehensive picture of the impact of the AI process on SAO to be developed by collecting data in a variety of ways. The validity of the study was increased by the mixed-methods approach because of its ability to provide data triangulation (Mertler, 2017). From a methodological standpoint, the pragmatic paradigm contends that useful avenues for creating knowledge by using both qualitative and quantitative methods exist. These can occur within a single study through mixed-methods research (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2002).

The convergent parallel mixed-method design of the study provided a platform for inquiry into the intricacies of students' experiences and perceptions by employing both qualitative and quantitative measures. The unique nature of the school, coupled with the mixed-method design, allowed for multi-faceted inquiry into the impact of a student-focused AI process on features of school climate within the setting. This design allowed for methods to be implemented during a similar timeframe. Specifically, both methods were prioritized equally and strands were kept independently during analysis before combining results into one overall interpretation (Creswell, 2014). By employing a mixed-method design, more comprehensive data were collected. Creswell (2014) noted that employing a mixed-method design allows for broader understanding of the research problem being investigated. The results of this design included observations and

statistical analyses, which provide greater depth when examining the aggregate data collected. Combining qualitative and quantitative methods is more likely to reduce biases on the part of the researcher (Creswell, 2014).

In the instance of the model of AI as a method of action research, four phases occurred in an effort to answer questions and foster change through data collection and analysis (Herr & Anderson, 2015). The rationale for connecting SAO and AI was that both emphasize strengths-based intangibles in an effort to improve capacities. Specifically, the AI process is intended to motivate change by focusing on positive occurrences within an organization and was developed to improve results (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). SAO is a measure that assesses features of school climate within school settings (M. Tschannen-Moran et al., 2013). The subconstructs of SAO, students' trust in teachers, academic press, and student identification with school, are also strengths-based in terms of the features they assess.

Description of the Action Research Intervention

The study design was convergent parallel mixed-methods structure. Quantitative data were initially collected by administering the survey on SAO to the students participating in the study. In the days and weeks following completion of the SAO survey, student participants participated in the AI "Four-I" process in five small groups of eight to nine participants per group and one facilitator located in classroom space within the school. Each small group experienced the AI process within a four-week frame. Lastly, participants completed the survey on SAO again in the days immediately following and two-months after the final phase of the AI process had been initiated. During these times, student participants also completed the survey on the AI process in

an effort to collect qualitative data from open-ended responses. The administrations of these surveys were spaced intentionally in an effort to provide enough time to see potential changes in features of school climate within the setting following the development of the action plans. The data collected conveyed the degree to which individual students' perceptions of SAO shifted over the two-month interval, as well as how student participants were influenced by the AI process and what themes and action plans emerged through these experiences that were related to features of school climate.

Initiate

An advisory group was formed to guide the AI process in the school. The advisory group was comprised of myself, an administrator, an academic case manager, a school counselor, and three students that also participated in the study. I encouraged student participants and advisory group members to express their opinions in an open and truthful manner.

During the first phase, initiate, I worked with the advisory group to introduce them to AI theory and practices and create student participant groups that aligned with the design of the study as well as the logistics of student participants' schedules. The informed consent form for advisory group participants can be found in Appendix A. Plans for and execution of field testing and refining our interview guide and survey on the AI Process prior to the next phase also took place. Additionally, plans for developing categories related to SAO for purposes of inductive coding of qualitative data collected were finalized. Lastly, advisory group members discussed how to informally encourage and support student participants following the final phase of the process.

Intentional logistical planning was important because all of the subsequent phases of the AI process will occur during instructional time within the school day. The work of the advisory committee included field testing and refining the interview guide, survey on the AI process, and Appreciative Inquiry Action Plan Framework, which can be found in Appendices B, C, and D, in an effort to most effectively develop an inquiry into the three aspects of SAO and to improve the process for students to share their perceptions of how SAO was influenced by participating in the AI process. These inquiries were conducted with participants beginning with the inquire phase.

The purpose of the initiate phase was to allow the advisory group to design the details of the inquiry and oversee each subsequent phase. Specifically, the AI process was intended to be utilized as a model to improve the current state of features of school climate based on the outcomes of the first iteration of the SAO. The advisory group met four times for an hour planning period after the school day before and throughout the AI process and two times for thirty minutes following the final AI phase.

During AI sessions with small groups of student participants, the advisory group member leading each group reminded all participants at the beginning of each of phase of the AI process of behaviors that were essential to the fidelity of the AI process. These included the idea that all efforts from the experience were intended to improve the setting, the content from the sessions was not to be shared outside of the advisory group with the names of individual students attached to it, and that student safety was an important aspect of the process. It should be noted that in sessions led by student members of the advisory group, an adult advisory group member was also present in the session for purposes of oversight.

Inquire

The next phase, inquire, was intended to generate data from individual student participants, as well as from the collective student participant group. At the beginning of the session, student participants paired off with one another and discussed the peak experiences, values, and wishes they have for their setting. These interviews were focused on each of the three subconstructs of SAO. They were not be audio recorded but all interviewer notes were collected.

The group then heard a brief overview of the AI process and viewed the video "Celebrate what's right with the world" (Star Thrower, 2007). Next, a member of the advisory group guided student participants to share information and data from their interviews in their small groups. Specifically, each partner shared their partner's story and wishes with the small group. From there, each group was encouraged to pull out three to five themes from these conversations in an effort to give life to the content being discussed. The collective group conversations were audio recorded to capture the richness of what was shared and determine emergent themes. Each group met for 1 hour and 15 minutes during the school day to complete this process.

Imagine

During the following phase, imagine, student participants were asked to challenge their imaginations. Specifically, students were able to access the themes they had generated during the previous AI phase. In each small group, student participants were given the option to work together as a larger group of seven or eight or split into smaller design teams based on individual interest regarding the themes previously shared. This resulted in a total of 11 design teams within five structured larger groups comprised of 38

total student participants. For example, within one group of eight, three students wanted to work on one specific design statement based on a theme shared during the previous AI session, while the other five students wanted to work on a different design statement based on a different theme also shared during the previous AI session. In these instances, students were given autonomy to break into smaller groups within their group of seven to eight and focus on developing ideas meaningful to them individually. Student participants were given paper, magazines, and art supplies that allowed them to create a visual artistic expression of their vison of what a successful future looked, felt, and sounded like in their school setting. They were told these could be in the form of a drawing or collage, with creativity encouraged.

Next, the participants worked within their groups to develop design statements. They were asked that their design statements be affirmative in nature, written in the present tense, convey aspects of the social architecture of the organization, possess criterion needed to be fulfilled, and be intended to provide a grounded vision to the group's desired future regarding features of SAO within their setting (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Watkins et al., 2011; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). The social architecture of the organization represents the components that are necessary to support future design statements (Cooperrider et al., 2003).

Members of the advisory group guiding the interactions within each student participant group encouraged student participants to consensually validate these design statements. All propositions were collected to serve as a data source. The propositions were an essential aspect of the AI process and provided insight into the strengths of the setting, participants' desires for the future, affirmative information, and facilitated

41

discussions during future sessions within the AI process (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005;

Watkins et al., 2011; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). Each group met for an hour and

15-minute period during the school day to complete this process.

Innovate

During the innovate phase, each group of eight to nine student participants

developed an action plan for enacting their design statement. This involved creating a list

of potential actions to be taken. The Appreciative Inquiry Action Plan Framework served

as a guide for this process and can be found in Appendix D. Each group of student

participants shared their outputs during the previous phases with all members of the

advisory group in attendance. Participants showcased their outputs and discussed

organizational steps with advisory group members in an effort to advocate for these

actions being enacted. At the conclusion of each group sharing their design statements,

the advisory group outlined and clarified details related to how participants can be

supported in moving forward with their plans.

All associated outputs related to this phase provided the final AI data source.

These sessions were not be time-bound and generally took around 1 hour and 15 minutes

during the school day.

Role of the Researcher

I currently work in the school setting in the role of Student Services Coordinator

and through this role I have had prior interactions with all of the participants. These

interactions include academic, career, disciplinary, and socioemotional-focused

exchanges. Considering my current position, I was aware that my prior experiences with

the participants might impact students' experiences and outputs during the study. As a

participant-observer, I encouraged student participants and advisory group members to express their opinions and share during the beginning of each of phase of the AI process that it was understood that all efforts from the experience were intended to improve the setting, the content from the sessions would not be shared outside of the advisory group with the names of individual students attached to it, and that student safety was an important aspect of the process.

I strove to neutralize any negative effects of my current role within the setting by providing an objective research agenda, encouraging participants to see me as a conduit to their visions, and by emphasizing the confidential nature of the experience. I was aware that I still might have exhibited unintentional and/or subconscious biases during the study, but I strove to exhibit fairness and avoid bias. The advisory group generally was able to provide one another with accountability in an effort to reduce these occurrences.

It is important to recognize the multiple roles I held when developing the data sources, collecting data, and analyzing data. Specifically, I was employed as a staff member when the reward and promotion structure for students was developed and I will continue to serve as a department lead, as a member of the school's four-person leadership team, and in a school counseling capacity with students before, during, and after the data were collected.

Participants

Advisory Group

The purpose of this group was to oversee all aspects of implementation and facilitation of the study. Members of the advisory group took on the role of facilitator

throughout the study and were involved in all aspects of the design. Significant aspects of this role included securing a participant pool, administering the surveys, and facilitating with AI process. Overall, the group oversaw the inquiry, brought about alternative viewpoints, and discussed potential inconsistencies in the structure of the study (Herr & Anderson, 2015). The advisory group met periodically throughout the study. This began with initially meeting to review and modify the design of the inquiry, followed by meeting to construct and organize participant groups and confirm each was heterogeneous in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and title status based on the reward and promotion structure. During this time, the advisory group also discussed procedures and plans regarding the next steps of the AI process that involve student participants. The group met between phases of the AI process to review and discuss procedures and next steps. The focus of these meetings was to ensure that the AI process is operating with fidelity.

Student Participants

The small and intimate nature of the school setting impacted the availability of participants and their respective group assignments regarding the AI process. The advisory group oversampled, selecting 60 total participants from Grades 10-12. The sampling process was done through stratified sampling, based on demographics and another criterion discussed below. Stratified sampling ensured that subgroups of a population were represented within a whole sample population in an adequate manner (Creswell, 2014). A total of 43 students returned their form. This number was reduced to 38, with the difference based on those that ultimately chose to participate in the AI process due to their interest. These 38 student participants were then organized into

smaller groups to complete the AI process and were representative of the demographics of the school. Participants were selected with the intention to represent the student body demographics as a whole. These include gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic variables. Participants were also selected based on their status within the reward and promotion system in an effort to have a balanced number of students from the Manager, Vice President (VP), and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) statuses, respectively. The manager group comprised half of the participants in each small group to reflect the proportion of students in the school at that status, with both other statuses represented by two to three students each. Each small group was balanced in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic variables and each participant was assigned to one of five small groups. The time-bound nature of this study and logistics related to having students participate during instructional time accounted for why all students were unable participate in the study. The informed consent form for student participants can be found in Appendix E.

Those surveyed were asked to provide their school lunch number as an identifier when completing the survey on SAO at each interval. Therefore, these results were confidential but not anonymous, with the outputs linked between the three administrations of the survey for comparison. This allowed me to discern the degree to which students' SAO shifted in the time between three administrations of the survey. It should be noted that only participants in the AI process completed the survey, so comparison data between survey administrations was not juxtaposed with that of non-AI participants.

Data Sources

There were three data sources for this study: the survey on SAO, the survey on the AI process, and the data collected from the AI process. Physical artifacts and audio recordings were used to guide and supplement the qualitative data collection for the AI process.

Survey on SAO

A survey developed by M. Tschannen-Moran et al. (2013) was used for this study. Student participants' perceptions of their school in terms of trust in teachers, student academic press, and student identification with school were assessed on the survey. The survey was utilized to collect data regarding students' perceptions of features of school climate at three instances: before, immediately following, and two months after the AI process. The survey is comprised of 34 Likert-type items. Items 1-10 measure students' trust in teachers, 11-18 measure academic press, and 19-34 measure student identification with school. The survey is provided in Appendix C.

Student Trust in Teachers. There are 10 items on the student trust in teachers portion of the survey. This assesses the extent to which students trust their teachers. C. M. Adams and Forsyth (2009) developed the Student Trust in Faculty scale, which measured student trust of teachers by assessing student perceptions related to teacher behavior. The scale was based on a five-faceted model of faculty trust developed by Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999). Participants responded to each item using a five-point response scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*).

The validity and reliability of the scale have been previously established. In terms of content validity, the items used were examined by professional educators regarding

46

their clarity, relevance, and conceptual indicators (C. M. Adams & Forsyth, 2009).

Additionally, a field test using exploratory factor analysis conveyed construct validity

and scores were strongly associated with affective conditions considered to be connected

with student behavior, including the other two sub-constructs of SAO (C. M. Adams &

Forsyth, 2009; M. Tschannen-Moran et al., 2013). In previous studies, the reliability was

measured using Cronbach's Alpha of Internal Consistency, with a range of .90 - .93 (C.

M. Adams & Forsyth, 2009; M. Tschannen-Moran et al., 2013). The outcomes from these

tests demonstrated that the scale is relatively valid and reliable in terms of measuring the

concept.

Academic Press. Academic press was measured using the academic press

subscale of the Organizational Climate Index (Hoy et al., 1998). This portion of the

survey consisted of eight items. For purposes of their study, M. Tschannen-Moran et al.

(2013) adapted this portion of the survey to assess student perceptions of academic press,

rather than teacher perceptions. This measure assessed the degree the setting sampled was

academically oriented. High expectations from teachers, teachers' beliefs in students'

abilities, the extent to which academic success was recognized, and student respect of

academic norms were all measured (Hoy et al., 1998). Items were given a score from 1

(*Rarely Occurs*) to 4 (*Frequently Occurs*).

A factor analysis supported the construct validity of the Organizational Climate

Index as each of the four dimensions loaded strongly (Hoy et al., 2002). A subtest of the

Organizational Climate Index found the reliability of the academic press subscale to be

.92 (Hoy et al., 2002).

Student Identification with School. The Identification with School

Questionnaire assessed the degree students experience a sense of belonging at school,

value school, and have school-related goals (Voelkl, 1996). This was used to assess

student identification with school in the survey and consisted of 16 items. The scale asks

participants to respond using a range from 1 (*Strongly Agree*) to 4 (*Strongly Disagree*).

In terms of validity, minimal information regarding content, response processes,

and relations with other variables was available. Regarding the internal structure of the

instrument, a confirmatory factor analysis found that African American and female

students displayed higher levels of identification than others assessed, which could be

attributed to a strong sense of identification among the participants studied within the

setting sampled (Voelkl, 1996). Evidence of reliability demonstrated an overall score for

internal consistency (alpha) of .84 using a sample of 3,539 eighth graders provided

evidence on the degrees of validity and reliability demonstrated by the instrument

(Voelkl, 1996). Additionally, M. Tschannen-Moran et al. (2013) found the coefficient of

reliability to be .96 when assessing for student identification with school.

It should be noted there are concerns have been raised among researchers

regarding the validity of the Identification with School Questionnaire. This is due to little

prior insight regarding the construct and content validity of the instrument being available

in the references reviewed (Voelkl, 1996). Previous research of a similar nature utilized

the instrument when measuring SAO (M. Tschannen-Moran et al., 2013).

Student-Generated Outputs from the AI Process

Evidence was collected from the latter three phases of the "4-I" model in an effort

to describe the degree and ways in which students' perceptions of SAO were influenced

by participation in the AI process. The intervention was developed based on the

theoretical foundation of AI and suggested practices of applying AI to evaluation

(Cooperrider et al., 2003; Preskill & Catsambas, 2006). These sources included

individual interviews, the design statements, action plans, and audio recordings.

Specifically, these data sources informed the analysis related to the extent

students' perceptions of SAO were influenced by their participation in the AI process.

The individual interviews and design statements, as well as the audio recordings of the

inquire and imagine phases, conveyed details related to the themes that emerged from the

AI process that support SAO. In order to encourage students' sense of safety while

sharing during their small-group sessions, students were encouraged to speak out openly

and reminded that any information shared would not be connected with individual

students once each small-group session was completed. Student participants were also

reminded that audio recordings were shared with the advisory group only, kept

electronically by me, and will be destroyed one year after the study is completed for

purposes of their safety. Lastly, the action plans provided insight into the action steps that

emerged based on the themes determined following the AI process.

Survey on the AI Process

Student participants completed the survey in the days immediately following the

AI process and again two months after the final phase of the AI process. This survey tool

is a researcher-developed measure. The purpose of the survey was to provide the advisory

group with data and insight into student participants' perceptions of the AI process. Data

collected from this measure were used to garner insight into if features of school climate

are influenced by the AI process, discern themes that emerged from the AI process that

support features of school climate, and highlight plans and action steps that follow the AI process.

The survey involved five open-ended questions:

1. What was your best experience with the Appreciative Inquiry process?

2. How did the Appreciative Inquiry process influence your feelings about the extent you trust your teachers?

3. How did the Appreciative Inquiry process influence your feelings about the ways in which academics are emphasized at our school?

4. How did the Appreciative Inquiry process influence your feelings about the extent to which you identify as a part of or belonging to our school?

5. After the Appreciative Inquiry process was completed, what plans and/or action steps emerged and how have they improved your experience at school?

These questions were coded for themes to convey the degree that student participants' perceptions of SAO were influenced by their participation in the AI process. The measure was field tested by the advisory group during the initiate phase and was administered to student participants when they completed the survey on SAO during the latter two times it was administered.

Data Collection

Data were collected from the Survey on SAO three times, from the survey on the AI process twice, and from the AI process throughout and in the two months following its occurrence. Between the first and second iterations of the survey on SAO, the AI process took place. The AI process provided the stimulus for the second and third iterations of the survey of SAO, as well as both instances of the survey on the AI process.

Survey of SAO

Survey data were collected at three intervals. The first occurred before the AI process and provided a baseline for the data analysis. The second was administered in the days immediately following the AI process. The third was given two months following the AI process after outcomes from the AI process had time to be explored and implemented.

AI Process

The AI process began the week after the initial survey on SAO. Some interactions that took place during each phase of the AI process were audio recorded. These recordings served as a qualitative data source.

The 4-I model of AI provided the conceptual framework and structure for the AI process. The best questions within an AI process invited participants to tell stories in a humanistic manner (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). Participants experienced the Inquire, Imagine, and Innovate phases of the AI process, with each session occurring for around 1 hour and 15 minutes during a traditional school day. The time of day in which each small group took place depended on the participants' availability and varied between sessions, although the groupings remained consistent.

Survey on the AI Process

The survey was given twice. The first iteration occurred in the days following the final phase of the AI process. The second was given two months following the final phase of the Appreciative Inquiry process. Participants responded confidentially to open-ended questions through an electronic device. These responses served as a qualitative data source.

The responses to the survey were intended to inform research questions one and three. Specifically, how participation in the AI process influenced students' perceptions of features of school climate and what action plans emerged based on experiencing the AI process were investigated. These data served as one of two sources for research question one.

Data Analysis

Data collected to answer all of the questions were analyzed using a framework approach to thematic analysis based on categories pre-determined by the advisory group that align with the subconstructs of SAO (Creswell, 2014). The framework served as a matrix for ordering and synthesizing the information collected. An index of categories was structured and then populated based on the content of the data collected. This process involved sorting and arranging the data collected through transcribing the audio recordings and scanning physical artifacts. The data were then indexed through open coding. Open coding involves breaking down, examining, and categorizing data (Creswell, 2014).

Action Research Question 1

The first question is how does participating in the AI process influence students' perceptions of features of school climate, as measured by shifts in SAO and outputs generated during the AI process? All participants used their school lunch number when completing each iteration of the survey. This allowed me to determine the degree in which students' perceptions of SAO shifted during the study in a manner that is confidential. The data collected to answer this question were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation,

and ranges for each of the subscales of SAO provided insight into the degree to which these aspects of climate at Tech High School existed. The inferential statistics involved a repeated measure analysis of variance (ANOVA) that was run twice, once for the mean SAO score from each of the participants and again for comparing the three subconstructs.

Additional data sources for this question were provided by outputs generated on both iterations of the survey on the AI process. Data collected to answer this question were analyzed using the inductive coding method, which occurred by structuring potential code categories before data is collected (Salkind, 2010).

Action Research Question 2

The second question is what themes emerged from participants in the Inquire phase of the Appreciative Inquiry process that support SAO? Data sources for this question were provided by physical artifacts and audio recordings. These included themes from individual interviews and action plans. Data collected to answer this question were also analyzed using the inductive coding method.

Action Research Question 3

The third question is what action plans emerged based on the themes and design statements created related to SAO during and in the two months following the AI process? Data collected to answer this question were analyzed based physical artifacts and audio recordings produced during the AI process. Specifically, this involved information generated that was related to action plans and communicated through the Appreciative Inquiry Action Plan Framework. Data collected to answer this question were analyzed using the inductive coding method. Table 1 shows the alignment of action research questions, data sources, and data analysis.

Table 1

Action Research Questions, Data Sources, and Data Analysis

Research Question	Data Sources	Data Analysis
1. How does participation in the AI process influence students' perceptions of features of school climate, as measured by shifts in SAO and outputs generated during the AI process in the school selected for the study?	Survey on SAO Survey on the AI process	Quantitative Analysis, mean, standard deviation, ranges for each SAO subscale, repeated measures ANOVA Qualitative Analysis, inductive coding
2. What themes emerged from participants in the Inquire phase of the AI process that support SAO?	Physical artifacts and audio recordings, including themes from individual interviews and design statements	Qualitative Analysis, inductive coding
3. What action plans emerged based on the themes and design statements created related to SAO during and in the two months following the AI process?	Physical artifacts and audio recordings, including themes related to action plans	Qualitative Analysis, inductive coding

Note. AI = Appreciative Inquiry; SAO = Student Academic Optimism; ANOVA = analysis of covariance.

Timeline

Once the proposal for the study was approved by the dissertation committee, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the College of William and Mary, and the administrator who oversaw grants and research at the school being studied, the data collection process began. Possible student participants and parents of student participants received the informed consent paperwork. The advisory group moved forward with their planning, organization, and participant selection processes. This included setting dates for all participants to take the survey on SAO. In terms of the AI process, five small groups

of eight or nine participants each were organized based on the student participants that returned their informed consent paperwork. The first three phases of the AI process took place over a four-week period, while the final phase occurred throughout the next two months. Two months after the final phase of the AI process was initiated, all student participants again took the survey on SAO, as well as the survey on the AI process.

Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions

Delimitations

There were certain boundaries set by me for purposes of this study. First, the study took place in a single regional high school with a unique instructional plan. Data were collected from 38 students with collectively stratified demographic variables, including gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and grade level. I was unable to assess more students due to logistics related to having students participate during instructional time. This accounts for why not all students participated in the study.

Other key stakeholders such as teachers, parents/guardians, administrators, and board members were not be included in the appreciative inquiry process. This violates the wholeness principle in AI and is a choice I made in the design of the study. Specifically, only student participants participated in the Inquire, Imagine, and Innovate phases of the process. It should be noted that student participants lack positional power within the organization, as well as in terms of their ability to speak for the entire community. Because student participants lack in organizational positional power, their ability to implement their visions for the school is contingent on the level of support they receive from adult stakeholders within the setting. It should be noted that if student participants do not receive necessary support, there may not be any major changes in school climate

55

related to the AI process. Furthermore, teachers and staff members, as well as parents, the board, and other stakeholders were not invited to participate in this cycle of inquiry.

Limitations

An important aspect when operationalizing school climate or features of school climate is that of its enduring capacity (Hoy et al., 1998). Due to constraints in the setting, this first cycle of the action research study took place over two months. This limited the potential of capturing the enduring aspect school climate during this initial cycle.

In addition, the relatively small sample size was a limitation of the study. This was because the small size provided relatively weak statistical power in answering action research question one. Consequently, the findings could only detect moderate to strong changes.

Assumptions

The study assumed that each student selected to participate believed that their experiences and perceptions were valued and felt comfortable when participating in the survey and AI processes. Participants were continually informed that their participation was optional. As the organization progresses, all stakeholders should contribute and reflect on findings that relate to open and honest collaborative engagement.

Ethical Considerations

The protocols of the study were approved under the William & Mary's Education Internal Review Committee. Next, the school being studied will approved the study. All students selected to participate in the study were provided informed consent paperwork to be completed by the student and their parent/guardian, with paperwork secured for each

individual student participant. The following statement was read at the beginning of each AI group sessions:

> You have been selected to participate in a doctorate study for the College of William and Mary. The study will gather information through survey data, audiotaping, and participants' notes. The information that is gathered will focus on your experiences and perceptions as a student at Tech High School. This information will provide insight as the school and school board seek to improve students' experiences. You may drop out of the study at any time without penalty. Please be aware that your responses and interactions are confidential and will not be personally attributed to individual participants. Your data will be kept confidential in a locked space and will be destroyed within a year of the conclusion of the study.
>
> It is important to note participants' prior knowledge of the organization and prior established relationships with one another. In terms of facilitating the study, those involved may have held multiple roles as insiders, participants, and organizer. These realities have the potential to cause conflicts of interest on the part of advisory group participants as well as student participants. Staff advisory group participants were expected to identify and minimize any individual conflicts, as well as any issues that arise related to confidentiality. Because of the dual roles that staff advisory group participants hold, maintaining full anonymity was not possible. However, staff advisory group participants were expected to safeguard any information shared with them in an effort to maintain the safety of student participants.

A possible cost of the study is that of consciously and intentionally discussing and labeling issues related to experiences and perceptions of inequity in the school setting with students. This experience may have had an unintended consequence of furthering minority group isolation.

The study was facilitated by the support of an advisory group that oversaw the planning process. This included the surveys on SAO and the AI process, as well as the organization and selection of student groups within the AI process. Throughout all aspects of the study, it was important that all participants experienced no harm due to their participation (Stringer, 2007). In order to ensure participants' safety, participants were reminded throughout their participation in the study that any information shared would not be linked to them individually. I kept all audio recordings electronically and will delete them within one year following the study's conclusion. Because members of the advisory group were the only staff to participate in the AI process, these reminders as well the small number of advisory group members who participate in AI sessions and/or survey administration fostered the safety of student participants.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as an intervention for improving features of school climate. The study design was that of convergent parallel mixed methods design, which allowed me to explore how the AI process impacted Student Academic Optimism (SAO) within the setting. The study utilized qualitative and quantitative analyses to evaluate the data. Quantitative data were collected by administering the survey on SAO to student participants during three intervals. Following their initial completion of the survey on SAO, student participants engaged in the AI "Four-I" process in small groups during a four-week frame. Student participants again completed the survey on SAO, as well as the survey on the AI process, within two days of the conclusion of the AI process. Lastly, participants completed both surveys two-months following the conclusion of the final phase of the AI process. Qualitative data were collected during the AI process through physical artifacts and audio recordings. The data collected were used to answer the three research questions.

Research Question 1: How Does Participation in the AI Process Influence Students' Perceptions of Features of School Climate, as Measured by Shifts in SAO and Outputs Generated During the AI Process in the School Selected for the Study?

Survey on SAO. A survey was used to examine student participants' perceptions of their school in terms of trust in teachers, student academic press, and student identification with school. Specifically, 38 student participants completed the survey on SAO three times during the study: before the AI process was initiated, immediately following the initiation of the final phase of the AI process, and two-months following initiation of the final phase of the AI process.

Table 2 displays the results of the quantitative analysis regarding the SAO aggregate and three subscale scores, including the mean, standard deviation, and range, during the first, second, and third administrations of the survey on SAO. Data during the first administration were collected before the AI process took place, while data during the second administration were collected in the day immediately following the final phase of the AI process and the data collected during the third administration were collected two months following the final phase of the AI process.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of the Survey on Student Academic Optimism (SAO) and Respective

Subscales (Times 1, 2, and 3)

Scale	Time 1				Time 2			Time 3		
	n	*M*	SD	Range	*M*	SD	Range	*M*	SD	Range
SAO	38	3.11	.35	1.99-3.75	3.06	.39	2.03-3.80	3.08	.40	2.13-3.82
Student Trust in Teachers	38	3.78	.66	1.90-4.80	3.58	.72	1.70-4.90	3.69	.66	2.00-5.00
Academic Press	38	2.91	.47	1.75-3.63	2.90	.51	1.25-3.75	2.86	.52	1.75-3.75
Student Identification with School	38	2.64	.25	1.88-3.25	2.68	.25	2.00-3.06	2.69	.23	2.19-3.19

Survey on the AI Process

In addition to the survey on SAO, qualitative data were collected through a survey

on the AI process in an effort to connect aspects of the AI process with features of SAO.

This survey was administered in the days immediately following the final phase of the AI

process, as well as two months following the conclusion of the AI process. The results of

each question from the survey were coded into four possible categories: student trust in

teachers, academic press, student identification with school, and general school climate.

In order for content to be coded into one of these categories, a student participant shared

information that was related to at least one of the three components of SAO or school

climate generally. In order for content to be classified in the general school climate

category, a student participant mentioned information related to norms, values,

expectations, and/or attitudes within the school setting that were not directly connected with any of the three components of SAO. The results below are structured based on each of the five survey questions.

Because student participants completed the second iteration of this survey two months following their sharing of their action plans during the final phase of AI process, it should be noted that the action plans proposed had had some time to be put into place by school leaders. While structural changes related to students' schedules that allowed more emphasis on additional time and support for elective courses had occurred, the majority of the other changes proposed were being considered for the school's long-term strategic plan, with no other tangible changes having occurred.

What Was Your Best Experience With the Appreciative Inquiry Process?

During the first interval in which students completed the survey on the AI process student trust in teachers was the category most frequently referenced, with 13 independent mentions. Student identification with school was referenced the next most frequently, with nine mentions. This was followed by seven references to general school climate and one reference to academic press.

During the second administration in which students completed the survey on the AI process 2 months after the completion of the formal part of the process, student trust in teachers was again the category most frequently referenced, with 27 independent mentions. Student identification with school was the only other subconstruct that was also mentioned during this administration with two mentions.

Overall, student trust in teachers showed a significant uptick between the first and the second administrations. Student identification with school, general school climate, and academic press dropped between administrations. That so many student participants referenced student trust in teachers as their best experience with the AI process is indicative of the influence of the AI process on this subconstruct and SAO. Table 3 displays specific content shared and is organized by subconstruct, time of administration, and representative excerpts.

Table 3

What Was Your Best Experience With the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) Process?

Subconstruct	Time 1	Time 2	Representative Excerpts
Student Trust in Teachers	13	27	"Getting to talk freely"; "having someone listen"; "being heard"; "getting to say what needs work"; "I trust staff more"; "Staff open to feedback"; "I know a staff person I can trust"
Student Identification with School	9	2	"Discussing ideas with other students made me feel more connected to them"; "realizing I am in the same boat as other students"; "realizing I have the same problems as other students"; "students talking more because they feel they belong"
General school climate	7	0	"Planning on how to make the school better"; "thinking of solutions"; "thinking of ways to feel safe"
Academic Press	1	0	"Discussing incentives to improve learning"

How Did the Appreciative Inquiry Process Influence Your Feelings About the Extent You Trust Your Teachers?

63

During the first iteration of the survey, ten student participants independently indicated that the AI process influenced their feelings about the ways in which academics were emphasized in their setting through open-ended responses. Student identification with school was referenced four times, while general school climate was referenced once and student trust in teachers was not referenced.

During the second iteration of the survey, eight student participants independently indicated that the AI process influenced their feelings about the way in which academics were emphasized in their setting. Responses to this question did not reference any other category.

Overall, over half of student participants indicated that the AI process influenced their feelings about the extent they trusted their teacher during the second administration of the survey. The other three categories were referenced minimally or not at all during the first administration and dropped between administrations if they were referenced. That so many student participants indicated that the AI process influenced their feelings about the extent they trusted their teachers is indicative of the impact of the AI process on this subconstruct, SAO, and school climate within the setting. Table 4 displays specific content shared and is organized by subconstruct, time of administration, and ideas most frequently shared.

Table 4

How Did the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) Process Influence Your Feelings About the Extent

You Trust Your Teachers?

Subconstruct or Category	Time 1	Time 2	Ideas Most Frequently Shared
AI Process influenced feelings about extent a student trusted their teacher	17	25	"Reminded me that teachers are willing to work with students"; "helped me to trust a little bit more"; "felt heard"; "helped me see from teachers' point of view"; "want to know what I have to say outside of grades"; "care how I feel"; "staff care about my happiness"
General school climate	2	0	"Safer, even though I don't feel like teachers listen more"
Academic Press	1	0	"Made me think teachers at this school really want to provide a good education"
Student Identification with School	0	0	

How Did the Appreciative Inquiry Process Influence Your Feelings About the Ways in Which Academics Are Emphasized at Our School?

During the first iteration of the survey, ten student participants independently

indicated that the AI process influenced their feelings about the ways in which academics

were emphasized in their setting through open-ended responses. Student identification

with school was referenced four times, general school climate was referenced once, and

student trust in teachers was not referenced.

During the second iteration of the survey, eight student participants independently

indicated that the AI process influenced their feelings about the way in which academics

were emphasized in their setting. Responses to this question did not reference any other category.

Overall, slightly less student participants indicated that the AI process influenced their feelings about the extent academics were emphasized during the second administration of the survey than during the first. The other three categories were referenced minimally or not at all during the first administration and dropped between administrations if they were referenced. This finding does not align with outputs generated during the final phases of the AI process, which are discussed more thoroughly in future sections. Table 5 displays specific content shared and is organized by subconstruct, time of administration, and representative excerpts.

Table 5

How Did the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) Process Influence Your Feelings About the Ways

in Which Academics Are Emphasized at Our School?

Subconstruct	Time 1	Time 2	Representative Excerpts
AI Process influenced feelings about extent academics are emphasized	10	8	"Allowed me to see how much we emphasize academics and why recognition is important"; "helped me to improve my grades"; "allowed me to give more input about academics"; "staff want students to succeed academically"; "I now see how much students are connected to their grades"
Student Identification with School	4	0	"Other students agree with the way I feel about certain things here and we can work together to do something about it"; "opened my eyes to problems I and my peers face"; "we actually have power in our school now"
General school climate	1	0	"Made me think teachers at this school really want to provide a good education"
Student Trust in Teachers	0	0	

How Did the Appreciative Inquiry Process Influence Your Feelings About the Extent to Which You Identify as a Part of or Belonging to Our School?

During the first iteration of the survey, 18 student participants independently indicated that the AI process influenced their feelings about the extent to which they identified as a part of or belonging to the school. Responses to this question also referenced student trust in teachers with school twice. Academic press and general school climate were not referenced.

During the second administration of the survey, 18 student participants again independently indicated that the AI process influenced their feelings about the extent to which they identified as a part of or belonging to the school. Responses to this question again referenced student trust in teachers with school twice, while academic press and general school climate were not referenced.

Overall, just under half of student participants indicated that the AI process influenced their feelings about the extent they identified as a part of or belonging to their school during the first and second administrations of the survey. The only other category that was minimally referenced was that of student trust in teachers. That a notable amount of student participants indicated that the AI process influenced their feelings about the extent they trusted their teachers is indicative of the impact of the AI process on this subconstruct, SAO, and school climate within the setting. Table 6 displays specific content shared and is organized by subconstruct, time of administration, and representative excerpts.

Table 6

How Did the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) Process Influence Your Feelings About the Extent

to Which You Identify as a Part of or Belonging to Our School?

Subconstruct	Time 1	Time 2	Representative Excerpts
AI Process influenced feelings about students identified as a part of or belonging to school	18	18	"Being involved in the process made me feel more included"; "showed me I can be more influential than I thought"; "influenced me to speak up more"; "feel more at home"; "feel prouder to be a part of this school"; "more involved in decisions"; "made me think how each student helps give our school more of an identity"; "I am more willing to participate and share because I feel I belong"; "my sense of belonging improved a lot"; "helped me to make friends and connect with others"
Student Trust in Teachers	2	2	"I don't trust teachers any more than before, but I do feel like they're listening more"; "it didn't change much but did shower me I trust teachers that value students' opinions"; "speaking out improved my comfort"; "staff really want to listen"

After the Appreciative Inquiry Process Was Completed, What Plans and/or Action

Steps Emerged and How Have They Improved Your Experience at School?

When students completed the first iteration of the survey, they had presented their

design statements and action plans to the advisory group in the two days immediately

prior. 15 student participants shared specific actionable steps that were aligned with one of the three SAO subconstructs or general school climate. Of these, six were aligned with student identification with school and four were aligned with general school climate. Three references were made to academic press and two references were made to student trust in teachers.

When students completed the second administration of the survey, they had presented their design statements and action plans to the advisory group about 2 months prior to this round of data collection. At this juncture, 19 student participants shared specific actionable steps that were aligned with one of the three SAO subconstructs or general school climate. Of these, 16 references were made related to academic press, two references were made to student identification with school, and one reference was made to general school climate. No references were made to student trust in teachers.

Overall, slightly less than half of student participants indicated that after the AI process was completed, action steps emerged that improved their experience at school while referencing ideas related to academic press. The other three categories were referenced minimally or not at all during the first administration and dropped between administrations if they were referenced. That so many student participants indicated that the AI process improved their experience at school in a manner connected with academic press is indicative of the alignment between these perceptions and student participants' outputs in the final AI phases. Table 7 displays specific content shared and is organized by subconstruct, time of administration, and representative excerpts.

Table 7

After the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) Process Was Completed, What Plans And/or Action

Steps Emerged and How Have They Improved Your Experience at School?

Subconstruct	Time 1	Time 2	Representative Excerpts
Academic Press	3	16	"Motivated to perform well and achieve more"; "celebrating achievements to motivate students"; "create more space for studying"; "more time for online electives and space for choosing when/what I work on"; "improving world language classes and tutors"
Student Identification with School	6	2	"Hearing other students' opinions"; "working together"; "appreciate feedback"; "improving lunch process so students can attend more clubs"; "I took steps to be nicer to people and make my experience a happier one"
General school climate	4	1	"Making a school that appreciates feedback"; "plans are going to make the school better"; "I actually believe change will happen"; "plans to increase the quality of our school"; "improving student comfort"
Student Trust in Teachers	2	0	"Plans on being nicer"; "feeling heard"

Research Question 2: What Themes Emerged from Participants in the Inquire Phase of the AI Process That Support SAO?

Interviews and Discussion

The individual interviews and the small group discussions were intended to generate eventual themes for design statements during the Inquire phase, with individual interviews and audio recordings from small group discussions analyzed and coded. Ideas

that mentioned a respective term or a concept related to one of the three components of SAO or school climate generally were organized into one of those four categories. In order for content to qualify into one of these categories, a student participant shared information in their individual interview or in their small group discussion that was related to one of the three components of SAO or school climate generally. For content to be classified in the general school climate category, a student participant mentioned information related to norms, values, expectations, and/or attitudes within the school setting that were not directly connected with any of the three components of SAO.

When students completed the Inquire phase, it was their first formal small group gathering during the AI process. It should be noted that the results shared are from the content shared during the individual interviews and small group discussions, as displayed in Table 9. Of the 38 student participants, there were 21 references to academic press. The next most commonly mentioned category was student trust in teachers, with 17 total references. General school climate was referenced 16 times, while student identification with school was referenced 10 times. Table 8 displays specific content shared and is organized by subconstruct, reference, and theme.

Table 8

Interviews and Discussion: Inquire Phase

Subconstruct	References	Themes
Academic Press	21	"Want an admission process based on achievement and interest in Computer Science"; "wish we were awarded for academic achievement"; "students need more free time during the day to get their work done"; "bring back self-paced nature of courses"
Student Trust in Teachers	17	Qualities of: kindness, reliability, open-mindedness, and caring frequently mentioned (both seeking and experiencing)
General school climate	16	Most commonly mentioned in relation to: greater autonomy in terms of freedoms related to seating and personal study spaces
Student Identification with School	10	Most commonly mentioned in relation to: students wishing for "more diversity" and "more regular high school experiences, such as clubs, field trips, and fun activities"

Design Statements

When students worked within their design teams to develop design statements, these physical outputs and audio recordings from small group discussions were analyzed and coded. To develop design statements, students had access to the themes they generated during their previous AI phase. Students used these to determine within their small group the specific purpose of their design statements. In four instances, small groups broke into two design teams in order to work on more specific ideas. Design statements that focused on the respective term or a concept related to one of the three components of SAO were organized into one of those three categories. In order for content to qualify into one of these categories, a student participant shared information in their small group audio recording explaining their design statement and/or a category was visually conveyed on their design statement poster.

73

Of the 11 total design teams, there were seven design statements that were directly aligned with academic press and four design statements that were directly aligned with student identification with school. Within the category of academic press, increasing entry of admitted students based on interest in computer science, and students being more encouraged and rewarded to achieve their academic goals were the ideas were most frequently emphasized. Within the category of student identification with school, creating better access for students to participate in extracurriculars and further developing extracurricular opportunities were most frequently emphasized. No design statement was developed that directly aligned with the category of student trust in teachers. See Table 9 for a list of the design statements.

Table 9

Design Statements as Aligned to Student Academic Optimism (SAO)

Academic Press (AP) Design Statements
PP 1: Develop program for rewarding students for academics, such as pathway selection related-successes and marking periods.
PP 2: Improve flexibility related to seating and scheduling to improve time management.
PP 3: Students should be encouraged to achieve their academic goals and rewarded appropriately.
PP 4: Increase number of students admitted based on interest in Computer Science.
PP 5: Develop admission standards based on interest in Computer Science.
PP 6: Improve students' performance in online classes.
PP 7: Admit students based on interest in Computer Science, as well as prior academic records.
Student Identification with School (SIDWS) Design Statements
PP 1: Create more extracurricular options and consider changing or expanding when students can attend extracurricular opportunities.
PP 2: Improve the lunch process so that students are able to attend more clubs for a longer amount of time.
PP 3: Look at ways to support clubs meeting outside of the school day.
PP 4: Expand the number of clubs based on student interest, rather than ideas that are already in place.

Note. PP = [define]

Research Question 3: What Action Plans Emerged Based on the Themes and Design Statements Created Related to SAO During and in the 2 Months Following the AI Process?

Action Plans

When students worked within their design teams to develop potential actions to be taken based on their design statements and shared these with the advisory group, these physical outputs and audio recordings from small group discussions were analyzed and coded. To frame the information, they shared with the advisory group, students used the Appreciative Inquiry Action Plan Framework. Because action plans were directly connected to the design statement generated by each group, the three categories of SAO used to classify design statements were used in the same fashion in terms of coding and analyzing ideas generated from the action plans. In order for content to qualify into one of these categories, a student participant shared information in their small group audio recording explaining their action plan to the advisory group and/or a category was visually conveyed on their Appreciative Inquiry Action Plan Framework.

Of the 11 total design teams, there were seven action plans that were directly aligned with academic press. These are displayed in Table 10. Within the category of academic press, surveying students individually and in small groups related to seating and scheduling to improve time management skills, developing a more thorough admission process that emphasizes Computer Science, and working with staff and students to improve rewards for academic behaviors were most frequently cited. There were four action plans that were directly aligned with student identification with school. Within the category of student identification with school, asking school leaders for extra

transportation funding and time for school events, clubs, and outside-of-school learning

opportunities were most commonly mentioned. Reconsidering lunch time and related

processes, which is currently when the vast majority of club opportunities take place, was

consistently highlighted as an actionable step within this category, with students

suggesting creating scheduled non-lunch time for these activities to increase access. No

action plan was developed that directly aligned with the category of student trust in

teachers.

Table 10

Action Plans

Subconstruct	References	Action Plans
Academic Press	7	Developing a more thorough admission process that emphasizes Computer Science through surveying stakeholders, meeting with Computer Science Specialist/employers, developing alignment between equity goal and Computer Science interest
		Working with staff and students to improve rewards for academic behaviors through surveying students, creating a committee of students and staff to focus on this, partnering with the PBIS program, training staff on how to celebrate student successes
Student Identification with School	4	Asking school leaders for extra transportation funding and time for school events, clubs, and outside-of-school learning opportunities
		Reconsidering lunch time and related processes (currently when majority of club opportunities take place)

Note. PBIS = Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.

Summary of Findings

Chapter 4 aimed to answer three research questions that explored AI as a means to

improve features of school climate. The first research question investigated how

participation in the AI process influenced students' perceptions of features of school

climate as measured by the Survey on SAO, the Survey on the AI process, and artifacts

and audio recordings from the AI process. Through the third administration of the Survey on SAO, no statistically significant difference was found in students' aggregate SAO scores as well as subscale scores. The Survey on the AI process provided a means for student participants to expand upon their experiences during the AI process, including as they related to each of the subscale features of school climate, their best experience, and the plans they had following the AI process. Through the first administration of the Survey on the AI process, student participants most frequently connected their best experience with ideas related to student trust in teachers, followed by student identification with school. In terms of plans following the AI process, student participants most frequently mentioned ideas related to student identification with school in their survey results. Themes from interviews, design statements, and action plans indicated a consistently high volume of ideas or mentions related to academic press. Student trust in teachers was mentioned more than student identification with school during interviews, but less during design statements and action plans.

The second research question explored what themes emerged from student participants in the Inquire phase of the AI process that supported SAO and was measured by artifacts and audio recordings from the second phase of the AI process. These results indicated that ideas or mentions related to academic press occurred most frequently, followed by ideas related to student trust in teachers. Ideas related to student identification with school were also mentioned, but with less frequency.

The third research question explored the actions plans that emerged based on the themes and design statements created that were related to SAO during and in the 2 months following the AI process. This question was measured by the Survey on the AI

process and artifacts and audio recordings from the AI process. Through the first administration of the Survey on the AI process, student participants most frequently connected their action plan with ideas related to academic press. Student trust in teachers was also mentioned on the survey by student participants in relation to their action plans. Student identification was not mentioned by student participants in the survey results.

Themes from design statements were reflected upon regarding their connectedness with the action plans that emerged during and in the two months following the AI process. The design statements created by design teams most commonly shared ideas related to academic press. Student identification with school was also commonly mentioned, with student trust in teachers only touched upon briefly.

CHAPTER 5

RECOMMENDATIONS

Student participants and advisory group members that participated in this action research study shared their wishes, dreams, and plans related to ideas for improvement within their setting through the AI process. These ideas consistently indicated certain themes, including actionable plans related to academic press and student identification with school. These themes were indicated across phases within the AI process through paired and small group sharing, design teams' design statements, and design teams' action plans. Ultimately, while no significant shift occurred in SAO, as captured by through survey data, analyses of the qualitative data sources conveyed that participation in the AI process influenced students' perceptions of each of the subconstructs of SAO.

Summary Findings for Study

Table 11 displays recommendations and is organized by subconstruct, related recommendations, and supporting literature. Connecting recommendations with supporting literature connects theory and practice through the framework of SAO.

Table 11

Recommendations Based on Student Academic Optimism (SAO) Subconstructs

Subconstruct	Related Recommendations	Supporting Literature
Student Trust in Teachers	Further explore the subconstruct of student trust in teachers in the setting as a means for school improvement and achievement.	C. M. Adams & Forsyth, 2009 Bryk & Schneider, 2002 Dirks & Ferrin, 2001 Forsyth et al., 2006 Goddard et al., 2001
Academic Press	Develop an interest-based admission process that emphasizes Computer Science and aligns with school's equity goal.	USDOE, 2004
	Work with stakeholders to improve systems related to students feeling rewarded for their academic behaviors.	Goddard et al., 2001 Ryan et al., 1992
Student Identification with School	Expand access to and quality of extra-curricular offerings.	Voelkl, 1997 Finn, 1989

Student Trust in Teachers

Results from the first and second administrations of the survey on the AI process indicated that student participants most frequently connected their best experience during the AI process with ideas or comments related to student trust in teachers. Additionally, individual interviews and small group discussions generated strengths-based ideas related to changes in the setting. During this phase, student trust in teachers was referenced with the second-most frequency. Common themes related to student trust in teachers emphasized qualities of kindness, reliability, open-mindedness, and caring. In some instances, these were discussed as qualities already present in at least one teacher more often than not, although there were certain instances students discussed them as qualities

they wished for in their interactions with teachers. It should be noted that the students that participated in the study only interacted with staff that were members of the advisory group during the AI process, rather than all staff or teachers. However, the content student participants generated was based on their experiences with all staff or teachers.

When considering how participation in the AI process influenced students' perceptions of features of school climate, a lack of alignment between themes generated during the second phase related to student trust in teachers and the outcomes of the final two phases should be noted. Specifically, ideas shared during the Inquire phase emphasized themes related to student trust in teachers; however, during the Imagine and Innovate phases, these ideas were no longer captured. Instead, design statements and action plans related to academic press and student identification with school were generated.

Tech High School is a school in its infancy that is ripe for innovative ideas related to streamlining the high school experience with practical vocational skills in the computer science arena. Research has demonstrated that student trust in teachers in valuable to achievement and that the majority of studies on trust look at the direct impact it has on performance (C. M. Adams & Forsyth, 2009; Forsyth et al., 2006; Goddard et al., 2001). To truly capture the innovative intention of Tech High School, as highlighted in the goals of the school, stakeholders must look beyond the direct effect on academic achievement to maximize trust's broader utility and possibilities within the setting. To do so, students, staff, and parents must align trust-related behaviors that involve vulnerability, benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999). Specifically, staff can develop and implement intentional actions that convey

81

vulnerability and allow students and parents the space to do the same. Examples of this could include discussing feelings related to content or sharing a recent experience and connected feelings or relevance. Benevolence is the most common aspect of trust; staff can build up benevolence with students and parents by demonstrating over time they are acting in their best interest (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999). Explaining how and emphasizing that they are doing so is a process that will assist this development. Adding predictability with benevolence can create reliability, while demonstrating professional and socioemotional capacities through skilled best practices will increase competence. Lastly, staff can further develop honesty and openness by being intentionally truthful and willing to share information. The relationships between staff, students, and parents are interconnected and significant for developing high degrees of trust, as well as academic press (Alig-Mielcarek & Hoy, 2005). In doing so, a foundation of trust can be built for all stakeholders that can eventually provide conditions for prosocial and academic achievement-related behaviors to occur (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001). Improving trust within the setting may also have positive impacts on the school's goal for equity, as prior research connecting socioeconomic status and trust indicated that fostering trust with parent and teachers can help to mitigate the impact of poverty (C. M. Adams & Forsyth, 2009).

Although student trust in teachers was most commonly related to participants' best experience at Tech High School, as revealed in the AI process and in themes generated in the Inquire phase, design statements and action plans focused primarily on academic press, followed by student identification with school. Because of the importance of trust as a significant aspect of school climate, school improvement, and

82

achievement, it is essential to the future of the setting that student trust in teachers is highlighted as an underlying area for improvement within the setting that must be further explored (C. M. Adams & Forsyth, 2009; Bryk & Schneider, 2002). It should also be recognized that trust can go unnoticed or under the radar unless it is lacking, which could also account for the misalignment between the themes and design statements that were generated.

Academic Press

During the Inquire phase, which involved individual interviews and small group discussions, the SAO subconstruct of academic press was referenced most frequently. Specific ideas shared emphasized themes related to admission based on interest in computer science, more recognition for academic achievement, and more autonomy related to pacing and completion within courses.

At the design statements stage, the process took a turn toward academic press with seven of the 11 total design teams focused on themes related to academic press. Among these design statements, ideas related to autonomy of time and space, interest-based admissions, and student recognition were common in themes of academic press.

The action plans student participants shared were directly connected with their design statements and similarly reflected these ideas, but with greater specificity related to possible action steps. Results from the action plans developed by design teams reflected the content generated during the Imagine phase of the AI process. Specifically, seven of the 11 action plans shared were connected to ideas related to academic press. Throughout the AI process, the importance of academic press to student participants was evident in many of their outputs. Stakeholders should recognize the frequency with which

academic press continually was discussed and emphasized and move forward with considering short-and long-term possibilities for improvement within the setting.

Actionable steps within these plans commonly cited developing a more thorough admission process that emphasizes Computer Science. Many regional or magnet schools have their own admission criteria and often use a lottery. In instances such as Tech High School, where a student body representative of community demographics is valued, weighted lotteries that give additional weight to specific demographic characteristics may be used (USDOE, 2004). However, a current empirically based means for assessing interest within a weighted lottery does not exist.

In schools with high degrees of academic press, academic achievement is an established norm and teachers support their environment through rewards, support, utilizing engaging and challenging coursework, and providing timely feedback (Goddard et al., 2001). When building more intentional and thorough means for students to be acknowledged and rewarded for their academic achievements, stakeholders should come together to consider these suggestions and generate next steps. To improve academic press within the setting, these conversations should focus on high and achievable academic goals being set and clearly understood by students, further developing an orderly and serious environment for learning, and creating ways for students to respect academic achievement and to be motivated to work hard (Goddard et al., 2001). The latter two components of academic press overlap with feedback student participants provided during the AI process and provide an important entry point for these conversations.

Academic press is also a construct that promotes academic achievement, with enhanced student learning a likely outcome in past research settings (Goddard et al., 2001). As such, prior research has also indicated that school leaders should work with their staff to improve academic press, and specifically how and why students are rewarded within their setting. Emphasizing beliefs, actions, and procedures among staff have been known to garner improvement within this subconstruct (Goddard et al., 2001).

Ultimately, students, staff, and other stakeholders should capitalize on students' interest in improving academic press. A wealth of ideas related to improving features of academic press within the setting were generated throughout the AI process. This indicated that students were drawn to expounding upon ideas connected with this subconstruct of SAO, although the reasons for this are unknown.

Student Identification with School

When individual interviews and small group discussions took place during the Inquire phase, student identification with school was referenced with the least frequency of the three subconstructs. Although students highlighted ideas related to further developing student identification with school and their perceptions of normal high school experiences, these came up less frequently than the other two SAO subconstructs.

Once student participants began to generate design statements during the Imagine phase, the AI process organically began to focus on student identification with school. Four of the 11 total design teams within the five larger AI groups focused on themes related to student identification with school. Among these design statements, access to and expansion of extracurricular opportunities were commonly mentioned and discussed.

Similarly, during the Innovate phase, four action plans were connected with ideas related to student identification with school. Among the four design teams that generated action plans related to student identification with school, the idea of increasing access to and expansion of extracurricular opportunities was consistent among each of them. Actionable steps within these plans commonly mentioned requesting extra transportation funding and time for school events, clubs, and outside-of-school learning opportunities from school leaders.

The strongest link to identification with school were action steps concerning participation-related behaviors. Specifically, participation while at school or in school-related activities has been empirically connected with achievement (Finn, 1989). Voelkl (1997) found that students with high academic achievement and active involvement in their learning were more likely to identify with their school. It should be noted that academic achievement did not contribute to explaining levels of student identification with school for African American students, although it did for white students (Voelkl, 1997).

Although this subconstruct was not emphasized as emphatically as either other subconstruct in terms of the themes generated by student participants and as academic press in terms of outputs from the final two phases of the AI process, the subconstruct of student identification with school is vitally important to student success. In another study, students that had at least one teacher who made them excited for their future and felt their school was committed to building the strengths of each student were 30 times more motivated than students who did not experience these indicators (Gallup, 2013). It is

therefore important to students' motivation that they are able to participate in experiences that excite them about future opportunities.

Considering expansion of and access to extracurricular activities speaks to student participants' desire to connect more wholly with their setting. Next steps for stakeholders should involve looking more closely into the possibilities related to expansion and access. Stakeholders should also recognize the empirically noted differences between ethnic groups as they relate to student identification with school when considering means for improvement and the school's equity goal.

The Interplay Between the Constructs of SAO

The theoretical link between school performance and academic press is relevant. Specifically, achievement motivation theory emphasizes that there are three predictors of achievement motivation: internalization, self-regulation, and autonomy (Ryan et al., 1992). Together, these intangibles orient students toward academic achievement. Internalization captures students' internal beliefs about education and is connected to intrinsic and extrinsic factors. The results of the AI process indicated that many students do not feel externally validated for their academic achievements. This reality may in turn impact their internal motivation. To create an emphasis on learning, a setting also requires high degrees of trust. To improve academic press, specifically in the areas discussed, the bridge between building capacities of trust and increasing academic press is connected.

In order to move forward with the recommendations related to rewarding students, it is essential that the connectedness between each of the subconstructs of SAO be acknowledged. Specifically, all three have been found to covary (M. Tschannen-

87

Moran et al., 2013). This means that when one is impacted, it is connected to the others, which are also impacted. Consequently, any measurable outcomes related to further inquiry into students' orientations regarding feeling rewarded will correlate with all three subconstructs.

Discussion of Survey on SAO

The difference between the mean scores of SAO and the subscale means were non-significant. A possible explanation of this is that due to the enduring capacity of school climate; it is known to be difficult to change. This is particularly true when considering the short time frame in which the study took place. Acknowledging this highlights the importance of future AI work being given more substantial time to enact measurable change, particularly from a quantitative standpoint. The study was constrained by the time frame, which may have limited its potential for fully capturing changes related to features of school climate. A previous longitudinal study over two years that connected an AI process and features of school climate, particularly student trust in teachers, did fund that measurable changes occurred (Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen years that connected AI process and features of school climate, particularly student trust in teachers, did find that measurable changes occurred (B. Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2011).

It should be noted that although the results from the survey on SAO were non-significant, the qualitative data collection components generated a large amount of intel related to features of school climate and possible strengths-based changes within the setting. Inquiry related to pairing the AI process with a quantitative measure should still

be considered in future settings for its potential, with more of an emphasis on longitudinal possibilities when considering quantitative aspects.

Discussion of Current Systems and Structures

It should be noted that the systems and structures that the advisory group and staff predetermined to be of likely concern for students did not dominate the AI process thematically in terms of the frequency or emphasis in which students found them to be problematic. This is an important reminder of the wholeness principle, as well as of the importance of inter-group collaboration. Specifically, before the study began the advisory group and staff estimated the most likely areas in which they preemptively thought students would have concerns regarding the reward and promotion system and the demographic disparities in those taking college-credit bearing courses compared with those who were not.

Instead, ideas related to students being rewarded for their academic achievement, admission based on their interest in computer science, and having more access beyond the classroom to extracurricular opportunities were emphasized by student participants. While there are notable overlaps in these ideas and those that the advisory group and staff originally estimated, their differences should be recognized. It should also be noted that although these differences exist, the content that students emphasized in the study aligns with the aforementioned goals of the school. Although the study was not framed around pre-selected issues by adult stakeholders, in many other instances of action research and policy-making, they may have been. Acknowledging this discrepancy is a heedful reminder to all stakeholders, but particularly school leaders, of the importance of having all voices within a system heard and valued.

Recommendations for Future Action Research

The findings of the study generated recommendations related to improving practices connected to features school climate. This section focused on connecting these findings with related recommendations and supporting literature. Ideas for improving each of the three subconstructs of SAO were emphasized. Although the final two phases of the AI process led to action plans related to academic press and student identification with school, recommendations related to student trust in teachers were also mentioned because this was an important theme generated in the Inquire phase.

Table 12 displays recommendations related to future action research and is organized by recommendations, related AI principle(s), and supporting literature. Connecting AI principles with possibilities related to future action research presents important potential connections between theory and practice.

Table 12

Recommendations for Future Action Research

Recommendation	AI Principle	Supporting Literature
Broaden the application of principles of AI beyond the AI process in the setting of the study.	Positive	Cooperrider et al., 2008 Fitzgerald et al., 2010
Increase values of mindfulness, collaboration, and authenticity within instruction, curriculum, and other educational programming.	Simultaneity Anticipatory	Fitzgerald et al., 2010 Fitzgerald et al., 2010
Continue implementation of an AI process to expand the possibilities of strengths-based change related to school climate or other features in the setting.	Wholeness	Fitzgerald et al., 2010
Further inquiry into what is rewarding to students and how stakeholders can shift students' orientation to be more intrinsically motivated	Poetic	Fitzgerald et al., 2010

Note. AI = Appreciative Inquiry.

Staff and other stakeholders at Tech High School should consider expanding on the application of the principles of AI both within and outside of the classrooms in the setting in which the study took place. This is because of the extent to which the AI process generated positive student-input and feedback regarding making strengths-based changes within the school. These outputs occurred due to the AI process, which is founded on a set of principles, including the positive, wholeness, and anticipatory principles (Cooperrider et al., 2008; Fitzgerald et al., 2010). Specifically, student participants were positive in their aims, which in turn increased their potential to inspire and motivate others. This aligns with the positive principle of AI, which emphasizes that positive questions lead to positive changes (Fitzgerald et al., 2010).

Students were also mindful, collaborative, and authentic in their conversations with each other, which aligns with the simultaneity principle. The simultaneity principle stipulates that bringing people together in groups creates ideas, capacities, and the potential for change (Fitzgerald et al., 2010). Open-ended data collected through the Survey on the AI process indicated that student participants felt more mindful, collaborative, and authentic in their conversations with one another and with the staff leading the AI process. These align with the anticipatory principle, which emphasizes that social clusters or systems move in the direction of the images, so the more positive they are the more positive their future outputs will be (Fitzgerald et al., 2010). Teachers and other staff should aim to apply and encourage these principles in their instructional, curricular, and other educational programming, when possible.

A more longitudinal implementation of AI would continue to emphasize the possibilities of strengths-based agency and change. Future possibilities for the AI process to occur within the setting include expanding the participant pool to include other stakeholders and/or inquiry into a specific subconstruct of SAO or other feature of school climate. Through various data sources, student participants consistently referenced ideas related to their perceptions of features of school climate while participating in the AI process. It should be noted that the interview protocol was structured that way.

If the AI process were to continue in the future and include other stakeholders, it would also align with the wholeness principle (Fitzgerald et al., 2010). This principle states that we do not exist in isolation, but rather are continually adding to a greater communal whole. Every participant within the community has valuable capital to contribute, which in turn engages the whole system. An example of this within the

current setting could be engaging all persons, such as staff, parents, and board members, within the setting in an AI process.

The AI process could also be replicated but with inquiry into a specific subconstruct of SAO or other features of school climate. Specifically, this could involve using a similarly small group or design teams within the setting, with inquiry focused solely on student trust in teachers, academic press, or student identification with school. The lack of alignment between the themes shared during the Inquire phase related to student trust in teachers and the propositions and action plans generated during the Imagine and Innovate phases, none of which involved student trust in teachers, indicate a possible point of entry for improving this subconstruct.

Regarding student trust in teachers specifically, it is of possible concern that the data collected indicated that students generated many themes related to changes that could be made to improve student trust in teachers during the earlier portion of the AI process, but did not opt to create design statements or action plans related to these ideas. This was true across small groups. Because this study was conducted in violation of the wholeness principle, stakeholders should consider the impact of this as well. All of these intangibles support the recommendation of future inquiry into the subconstruct of student trust in teachers.

There are many possibilities related to future action research inquiry into the subconstruct of student trust in teachers within the setting. Trust is a significant component of meaningful school improvement, is reciprocal, and is connected with the degree teachers trust students (C. M. Adams & Forsyth, 2009). Such action research could involve students and teachers exploring and intervening to improve features of

trust. This could occur within or outside of an AI process and also holds the potential to improve achievement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Further inquiry into students' orientations regarding feeling rewarded, and on a broader scale student motivation, should also be considered. Specifically, students could be surveyed to indicate what makes them feel rewarded. From there, adult stakeholders should reflect on how they can shift students' orientations to be more intrinsically based and feel more pleased with themselves in relation to their feelings about school-related processes. It is clear from the findings previously shared related to rewarding students within the setting that students want to be externally rewarded. When considering that a current means for rewarding them exists, it can be said that their collective desire for external acknowledgment is not being met. Delving into this matter further will allow insight into what students are looking for and what they want that is different from the current system in place.

Overall, outcomes from the AI process provided an opportunity for school leaders and other stakeholders to foster change in a positive and intentional way. These findings convey the potential of AI as a tool for positively connecting stakeholders with a means to consider and improve features of school climate within an educational setting. Future inquiry that is intentional and well-aligned with the wholeness principle and/or specific subconstructs of SAO will provide further insight into these intangibles within and beyond the setting in which the study took place.

Final Thoughts

Students, staff, and other stakeholders should capitalize on the wealth of ideas related to improving features of school climate within the setting. At its core, the AI

94

process provides a model for engaging stakeholders in self-determined change. The findings of this study support the AI process as a viable means for producing actionable plans related to improving features of school climate. Specifically, AI offers school settings the opportunity to tap into the desires and wishes of their stakeholders that already exist and to celebrate what is working and how it can be improved upon. The structure of AI encourages strategic thinking, which is exemplified by design statements and action plans. Ultimately, this study supports the AI process as a, positive approach to fostering changes in policy, planning, and leadership capacities within secondary educational settings.

APPENDIX A

STAFF AND STUDENT ADVISORY GROUP LETTER OF INFORMED

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY

Purpose and Procedures: You or your student are being asked to participate in an

advisory group overseeing an action research study. The study looks into students'

perceptions about school climate and how the Appreciative Inquiry process may impact

their perceptions. If you agree to participate in this research study, you will be asked to

participate in discussions and planning related to various features of the study, including

student participant groups, administering the survey on SAO, and AI processes and

theory. You or your student will be asked to meet at least three times when they are

available during the school/work day to participate. The timeline of this study will be

from December 2019 to March 2020, with all meeting dates occurring during this period.

Voluntary Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. You or your student may opt out

or discontinue participation at any time and are free to participate or not participate

without prejudice. If questions or activities arise that you do not want to respond to or

participate in, you or your student are able to opt out at any point with no penalty.

Participation in this study will not impact their responsibilities with your school and/or

employer. You or your student's participation in the study will be kept confidential. You

or your student has the right to review artifacts they generate during participation in the

study. All results that are shared will be done with no name or identifying information of

participants attached to it.

Risks and Benefits: There are no risks involved by participating in this study. By

participating in this study, the inputs generated by you or your student will benefit the

setting by providing insight into means for improving the school. Results of the study will be shared with administrators and other stakeholders within the setting without identifying names or other identifying information of participants.

Compensation: There is no compensation for your participation in the study.

Confidentiality: You or your student's identifiable and personal information will not be connected to outcomes of the study or shared in a manner that identifies you personally during any juncture. Information shared during small group activities is not considered private; therefore, this information will not be considered confidential. However, this information will never be shared in a manner where it is linked with individual staff and/or students. The information shared will be used to improve school climate-related practices at the setting where the study is conducted. It will be kept electronically with the primary researcher under lock and key for a year following the study's conclusion and then will be destroyed.

Contact: Contact the primary researcher, Gwendolyn Ashworth, or Dr. Tom Ward, head of the EDIRC at the College of William and Mary, with any questions or concerns. I can be reached at 540-282-2858 or by email at gwendolyn.ashworth@coderva.org. Dr. Tom Ward can be reached at 757-221-2358 or by email at tjward@wm.edu. You will receive a copy of this consent form.

I certify that I have read this form and volunteer to participate in this research study as a staff or student member.

Staff Name_____

Staff Signature _____ Date _____

Student Name_____

Student Signature _____ Date _____

Parent/Guardian Signature _____ Date _____

APPENDIX B

INQUIRE PHASE: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Directions: In pairs, discuss the following for the next 20 minutes.

1. Think back on your experiences at this school and remember a time when you felt that you trusted a teacher or staff member. Trust could involve you feeling the person was caring, honest, reliable, competent, or otherwise acting in a way that made you feel that you had confidence in them. Share a story about that time with detail.

    a. Describe the actions of this teacher or staff member that helped to foster your trust?

    b. What difference did it make to you to have an adult you could trust at school?

2. How does your school emphasize academics to make you the best possible student you can be? Reflect and share your thoughts on the question below.

    a. To what extent are high, achievable academic goals set for you? To what extent are these goals clear to you?

    b. To what extent is your learning environment orderly and serious? In what ways?

    c. To what extent are students around you motivated to work hard? How do you see this played out?

    d. Is academic achievement respected by your peers? In what ways?

3. What makes you feel that you really belong here at school?

    a. In what ways do you feel connected to this school?

b. Why are the goals of this school important to you?

4. If you had three wishes for our school to make it the kind of place you would want to come to each day, what would they be? What would it take to make this a school where you could trust your teachers, where we are serious about academics and honor those who work hard academically, and where you felt like you really belonged?

APPENDIX C

SURVEY ON STUDENT ACADEMIC OPTIMISM

Directions: Please tell us how much you agree or disagree with each of the statements about your school by filling in the bubbles on the right, choosing from

(1) Strongly Disagree, (2) Disagree, (4) Agree, or (5) Strongly Agree.

1. Teachers are always ready to help.   1 2 3 4 5

2. Teachers are easy to talk to at this school.   1 2 3 4 5

3. Students learn a lot from teachers in this school   1 2 3 4 5

4. Students at this school can depend on teachers for help.   1 2 3 4 5

5. Teachers at this school do a terrific job.   1 2 3 4 5

6. Teachers at this school really listen to students.   1 2 3 4 5

7. Teachers always do what they are supposed to do.   1 2 3 4 5

8. Students are well care for at this school.   1 2 3 4 5

9. Teachers at this school are good at teaching.   1 2 3 4 5

10. Teachers at this school are always honest with me.   1 2 3 4 5

Directions: The following are statements about your school. Please indicate the extent to which each statement characterizes your school from **rarely occurs (1)** to **very frequently occurs (4)**.

1. The school sets high standards for academic performance.   1 2 3 4

2. Students respect others who get good grades.   1 2 3 4

3. Students seek extra work so they can get good grades.   1 2 3 4

101

4. Parents exert pressure to maintain high standards.   1 2 3 4

5. Students try hard to improve on previous work.   1 2 3 4

6. Academic achievement is recognized and acknowledged by the school.   1 2 3 4

7. Parents press for school improvement.   1 2 3 4

8. Students in this school can achieve the goals that have been set for them.   1 2 3 4

Directions: Please tell us how much you agree or disagree with each of the statements

about your school by filling in the bubbles on the right, choosing from

(1) Strongly Disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Agree, or (4) Strongly Agree.

1. I feel proud of being part of my school.   1 2 3 4

2. I am treated with as much respect as other students in my class.   1 2 3 4

3. I can get a good job even if my grades are bad.   1 2 3 4

4. The only time I can get attention in school is when I cause trouble.   1 2 3 4

5. I like to participate in a lot of school activities (ex: sports, clubs, plays)   1 2 3 4

6. School is one of the most important things in my life.   1 2 3 4

7. Many of the things we learn in class are useless.   1 2 3 4

8. Most of my teachers *don'*t really care about me.   1 2 3 4

9. Most of the time I would like to be any place other than school.   1 2 3 4

10. There are teachers or other adults in my school I can talk to if I have   1 2 3 4

   a problem.

11. Most of what I learn in school will be useful when I get a job.   1 2 3 4

12. School is one of my favorite places to be.   1 2 3 4

13. People at school are interested in what I have to say.   1 2 3 4

14. School is often a waste of time.   1 2 3 4

15. Dropping out of school would be a huge mistake for me.   1 2 3 4

16. School is more important than most people think.   1 2 3 4

APPENDIX D

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY ACTION PLAN FRAMEWORK

1. What were the themes our group used for our vision/design statements?

2. What was our specific vision/design statement?

3. What roles and responsibilities will group members and others need to take on to bring our vision/design statement to life?
   a. Group members:
      - Who are they?

      - What will their responsibilities be?

   b. Others:
      - Who are they?

      - What will their responsibilities be?

4. What strategies and/or steps does our group need to suggest in order to bring our vision/design statement to life? Who is enacting those strategies?

5. What parts/departments/systems/persons within our school can be linked to our action plan?

6. What resources do these parts/departments/systems/persons have that could help bring our vision/design to life?

7. How can we work together with these parts/departments/systems/persons to bring our action plan to life?

8. Our action plan can be summarized through the following steps (as many needed):
    1)

    2)

    3)

APPENDIX E

STUDENT AND PARENT/GUARDIAN LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT TO

PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY

Purpose and Procedures: Your student is being asked to participate in an action research study. The study looks into your student's perceptions about school climate and how the Appreciative Inquiry process may impact it. If you and your student agree to participate in this research study, your student will be asked to participate in three short surveys, as well as small group activities, in an effort to create future actionable plans to improve the setting. Your student will be asked to meet at least three times in which they are available during the school day with a staff member and a small group of students, as well as two other times to complete the survey. Each small group meeting will run no more than an hour and 15 minutes, while your student will likely be able to complete the survey in 5-20 minutes. During each small group meeting, all participants will be audio recorded so that information shared is accurately captured. The timeline of this study will be from December 2019 to March 2020, with all meeting dates occurring during this period.

Voluntary Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. You or your student may opt out or discontinue your student's participation at any time and are free to participate or not participate without prejudice. If questions or activities arise that your student does not want to respond to or participate in, your student is able to opt out at any point with no penalty. Your student's participation in this study will be kept confidential within the small group your student participates in. Your student has the right to review artifacts they generate during participation in the study. All results that are shared will be done with no name or identifying information of participants attached to it.

Risks and Benefits: There are no known risks involved by participating in this study. By participating in this study, your student will benefit the setting by providing insight into means for improving the school. Results of the study will be shared with administrators and other stakeholders within the setting without identifying names or other identifying information of participants.

Compensation: There is no compensation for your student's participation in the study.

Confidentiality: Your student's identifiable and personal information will be connected to your student's survey results. Information shared through surveying and during small group activities is not considered private; therefore, this information will not be considered confidential. However, this information will never be shared in a manner where it is linked with individual students. The information shared will be used to improve school climate-related practices at the setting where the study is conducted. It will be kept electronically with the primary researcher under lock and key for a year following the study's conclusion and then will be destroyed.

Contact: Contact the primary researcher, Gwendolyn Ashworth, or Dr. Tom Ward, head of the EDIRC at the College of William and Mary, with any questions or concerns. I can be reached at 540-282-2858 or by email at gwendolyn.ashworth@coderva.org. Dr. Tom Ward can be reached at 757-221-2358 or by email at tjward@wm.edu. You will receive a copy of this consent form.

Printed Student Name _____

Student Signature _____

Date _____

Printed Parent/Guardian Name _____

Parent/Guardian Signature _____

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