Inquiring through the appreciative, interactive perspective of Situational Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Situational Analysis is a framework for analysing complex situations and identifying key principles for effective action. It is one of many inquiry frameworks available to networks of professionals, within and across educational settings, who are collaborating to enhance the learning and wellbeing of all children in their schools. The Situational Analysis process is described in this article, making particular reference to interdisciplinary networks in which shared activity is the key driver for strengthening professional practice. The framework is an interactive, appreciative inquiry process that balances structure with flexibility to accommodate the range of sense-making processes present in diverse environments. Ten discrete steps are divided into four broad stages: setting up, data gathering, analysing and synthesising, and taking action. In this article, each step is detailed to guide the facilitation of inquiry or research projects.

Key words: Inquiry, framework, positive, ecological, interactive, education, psychology

INTRODUCTION

Situational Analysis (Annan, 2005) is an ecological, appreciative framework used to formulate data-supported inquiries. The framework guides professionals to examine interaction across social and cultural contexts by structuring shared, inquiry activity in real-life situations. Applied in educational settings, contextualised frameworks such as the Situational Analysis illuminate the views, aspirations and cultural practices of those people involved with children's learning and wellbeing and engender authentic knowledge exchange, shared sense-making and connected activity.

Situational Analysis enables people working together to:

» Inquire about learning and wellbeing across multiple settings from the perspectives of participants

» Identify positive supports for learning and wellbeing

» Engage in collaborative sense-making with others

» Collaborate in planning of new action

» Implement new activity within and across settings

» Build effective new practices on the strongest foundations of learning and wellbeing.

The framework was developed to guide positively-focused inquiries by psychologists whose work involves understanding situations from ecological viewpoints and facilitating new activity in the broad and unique contexts of people's lives. Since its inception, we have observed that facilitated Situational Analysis is equally applicable for inquiries undertaken by teachers and school leaders. Although it has been regularly applied by psychologists to structure systems-level educational projects in schools and health facilities, extending Situational Analysis use to networked learning communities has the potential to reach significantly more students through the de-privatisation and continuous improvement aspects inherent in the process.

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Situational Analysis involves two interrelated aspects, both of which are integral to the framework. One aspect is the perspective, which encompasses the theoretical underpinnings of the framework, and the other is the structure that guides procedures.

Perspective: Key Understandings Underpinning Situational Analysis

The Situational Analysis framework is semi-structured to support predictability and integrity throughout the inquiry process and, being broad and open in terms of content, provides ample space for negotiation of the specific nature of activity within the frame. It is designed to encourage deep understanding of learning environments, appreciation of foundational supports and the design of new environments that are relevant for people, time and place. Four key ideas underpin the Situational Analysis. They are:

» Appreciative view

» Ecological perspective

» Data supported decision-making

» Negotiated participation and collaboration

Appreciative view

An integral component of the Situational Analysis is its positive, appreciative perspective. The focus of inquiry using this framework is not to identify and fill gaps but to move from a starting point, wherever that may be, in the direction of progress. Existing strengths, learning and environmental supports for learning and wellbeing are identified when embarking on Situational Analysis inquiries in order to identify strong foundations for new learning. When the current and past learning of students or teachers is acknowledged, and when their intentions to move to their next steps are not perceived as efforts to make up deficits, positive outcomes are promoted (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham & Linkins, 2009). Without knowledge of those events and relationships that are sound, effective or nurturing, freshly planned educational activity may inadvertently interfere with vital supports.

Positive approaches have at times been misunderstood as practices that ignore difficult circumstances but this has never been the intention of positive psychology (Peterson, 2008). When a positive view is taken, events and situations are simply considered from different angles. The appreciative view, an integral part of the Situational Analysis, extends across the contexts involved, for example, identifying and building on supportive relationships and teaching practices. While these helpful aspects of situations are foregrounded, presenting challenges are not ignored; the focus moves from what we don't want to what we do want. Programmes of change consider the direction of progress and identify possible 'next steps'. In a nutshell, positive approaches work to make shifts from 'This is where we are now', to, 'What will help moving forward'.

Ecological perspective

Contexts of learning are living systems comprising learning and teaching interactions across social and cultural environments. Interactive theorists such as Bronfenbrenner (1979), Vygotsky (1978) and Engeström (1983), Klemenčič (2015), Feuerstein (2010) and Siemens (2006) have described the social complexity of learning and the development of children and all learners, proposing that children and adults do not learn in isolation but in relationship with others. Learning environments are depicted as complex and dynamic, with ongoing new learning assuring their continual reshaping. Interactive theories underscore the value of schools and communities learning about children's environments from the multiple perspectives of children, families, communities and schools before making hasty changes. And, as all parts of ecological systems impact on one another, understanding interactive learning environments involves academic learning along with physical, social and psychological wellbeing (Anderson & Graham, 2016; Lee, 2010). Today, this includes the cyber world. Siemens (2006) observed that, in the information age, longstanding boundaries are in constant flux, with the social environment, connected globally through the internet,

introducing ever-increasing opportunities for social connection. The influences on children's stories of themselves and the world is now impacted more directly by local and global socio-political environments.

Data-supported decision-making

Situational Analysis provides predictability in circumstances that call for a wide range of participant-determined interpretations and actions. Predictability, generated through mutual understanding of the broad framework and the sequence of stages and tasks, enhances levels of trust and perceived integrity of the process (see Fisher & Brown, 1989).

Data threads through the Situational Analysis in a coherent way, with each step being shaped by the findings of the previous step. The focus of the inquiry (e.g. wellbeing, engagement, social relationships, learning) is justified on the basis of information at hand. This information generates hypotheses, or hunches, about possible influences on the focus topic, these hypotheses being used to shape the collection of further data. An integral aspect of the Situational Analysis is the requirement to collect multiple sets of data from various sources and different settings to strengthen the internal validity of the analysis. This allows data to be triangulated and to generate broad and deep understandings though the integration of diverse perspectives on the same situations. Sense is made of the data collected through identification of themes and the relationships among the themes. This sense-making gives rise to principles that guide the planning of changes and their subsequent implementation. The outcomes of the implementation provide data on which the cycle of inquiry can be evaluated.

Negotiated participation and collaboration

In most cases, the Situational Analysis is facilitated by a leader or core team for an inquiry. The facilitation and coordination role in inquiries helps check that the process remains focused on its purpose, is carried out collaboratively, proceeds with integrity and is meaningful for everyone involved. However, while key analyses may be made by a core group of a team or community, decisions must reflect the data collected and represent the voices of those who have contributed information.

Structure: The Situational Analysis Process in Action

The Situational Analysis progresses through four major stages. These are:

1. Setting up
2. Data Collection
3. Sense-making - analysis and synthesis
4. Taking action.

Within each of the four stages are steps, or 'tasks'. Steps may occur simultaneously during the setting up stage when the inquiry is focused, reframed and negotiated. The three following stages generally proceed in a more linear way although, particularly during data gathering, they may loop back and forth. Threaded through all activity in these stages are the four theoretical aspects of the Situational Analysis; the inquiry is appreciatively focused, ecologically conceptualised, negotiated and collaborative and systematic (See figure 1). Although the majority of inquiries begin at the first step, the cyclic framework can also be applied in a 'hop on, hop off' way. For example, if participants have, at the outset, decided to test and then refine a particular approach to suit their learning environment, they would begin at Step 8, planning to take action. The review of action at Step 10 would lead to and inform Step 1, the focusing of a more in depth inquiry in which the approach would be refined.
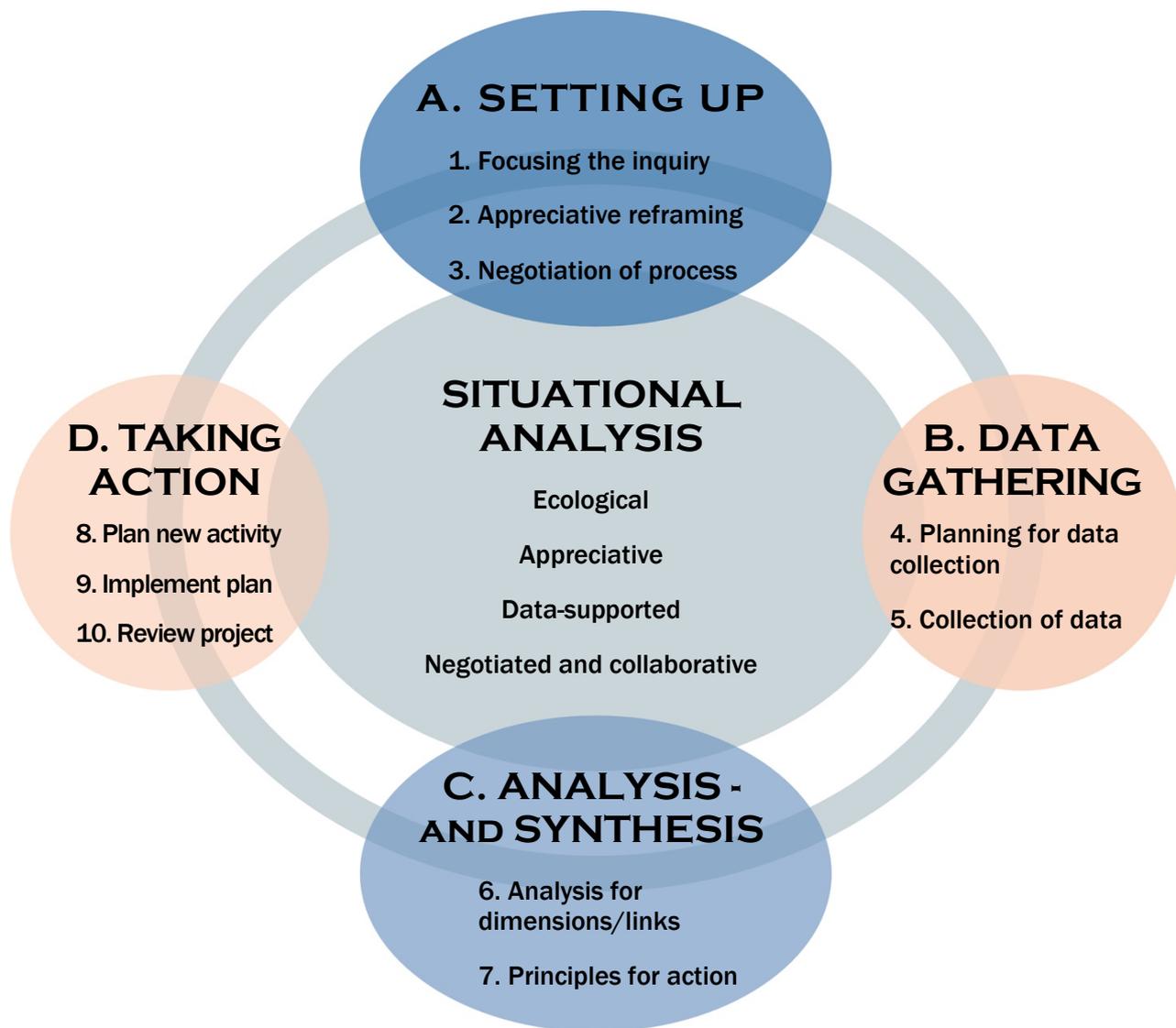
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A. SETTING UP

1. Focusing the inquiry

2. Appreciative reframing

3. Negotiation of process

SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

Ecological

Appreciative

Data-supported

Negotiated and collaborative

D. TAKING ACTION

8. Plan new activity

9. Implement plan

10. Review project

B. DATA GATHERING

4. Planning for data collection

5. Collection of data

C. ANALYSIS AND SYNTHESIS

6. Analysis for dimensions/links

7. Principles for action

Figure 1. Stage and tasks of the Situational Analysis

1. Setting up

The setting up stage is critical because it largely determines the way each subsequent stage proceeds. A key role for facilitators is to negotiate and communicate with participants about the process ahead so that the process can be shaped to align with particular cultural contexts and broad tasks can be predicted, even though specific actions of the inquiry are yet to be detailed. During the setting up stage, participants focus the inquiry (Step 1 on the Situational Analysis diagram), ensure the perspective is appreciative (Step 2) and negotiate the process ahead (Step 3). Facilitators or coordinators of inquiries consider the following:

a. *The purpose and focus of the inquiry*

A Situational Analysis inquiry begins when a group of people want to find out more about a topic of interest or a mutual challenge. The shared interest or challenge becomes the focus of the inquiry (e.g. student-teacher inter-agency, school-wide systems to support children's wellbeing, student engagement in learning activity, providing learning support for individual children) and may emerge in a variety of ways. For example, the focus may reflect participants' observations of teaching practice, review of students' achievement scores, or parent reports of their children's interactions at home. Since, most often, each participant enters the inquiry with a particular view

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of the topic and reason for wanting to be involved, the inquiry focus is always negotiated and refined to ensure that it is mutually understood, valued and relevant to the participants.

The process of negotiating the focus of the inquiry means exchanging and examining the multiple and diverse views the inquiry group members have of the same topic. This exchange of views contributes greatly to the quality of the inquiry because *shared understanding of the focus binds the participant group*. It is worth spending time clarifying, and even documenting, the focus and outlining the procedures ahead. *The negotiation of the focus results in collaboratively scripted inquiry questions*. For example, teachers may ask, "How can we support children to take agency in their learning?", "How can we differentiate the writing programme for all young people?", or, "How can we develop a school-wide system of support for the wellbeing of all students?"

b. *Appreciative reframing*

The appreciative framework encourages participants to view presenting situations as starting points; it supports those involved to advance from *where they are* to *where they wish to be*. Although inquiries are often precipitated when problems are noticed, once the problems have been acknowledged, the inquiry focus can be reframed to centre on what is desired. That is, very quickly, the group begins to focus on finding out about what supports a good outcome. Facilitators work to ensure that this positive, appreciative view is maintained throughout the inquiry and does not default to a search for deficits. What we are looking for, will largely determine what we see. As Cooperrider and Whitney (2007) observed, 'People grow in the directions in which they inquire'.

c. *Participation*

Participation of those who will be involved in and inform the inquiry is determined by the specific precipitating circumstances. For example, an inquiry about children's wellbeing would call for the participation of children and those whose actions influence their wellbeing. The participant group may, however, extend to include new people as the inquiry progresses. Shared and negotiated understanding of participant roles within the inquiry can help streamline procedures and maintain relationships.

d. *Baseline information*

Baseline information must be gathered early as views of any presenting situation change from the moment an inquiry is initiated. Baseline information may comprise various forms ranging from individuals' stories to quantified achievement data. Information available at the beginning of the inquiry is recorded early and stored so that it can be compared with end-of-inquiry data.

e. *Ethical, professional and cultural considerations.*

Ethical principles relevant to the professions or workplaces of participants are discussed and articulated at the setting up stage (e.g. respect for participants and cultural safety, voluntary participation).

f. *Timetable.*

Although the specific detail of activity in a Situational Analysis is determined during the course of the inquiry process, an outline of the inquiry cycle and tasks at each stage is helpful for predicting and scheduling events. An estimated time frame makes it easier for potential participants to make decisions about their availability.

2. Data Gathering

The data stage begins with the facilitator or inquiring team planning the collection of information, deciding on the types of information to be gathered and selecting the methods to be used (Step 4). It involves scoping, or determining the parameters of data collection, and actively collecting, recording and storing data (Step 5).

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a. *Planning for data collection: Areas to explore through data collection*

With the topic of the inquiry clarified, decisions are made about ways of exploring possible influences. The scope and nature of data collection is guided by the initial hypotheses generated through participants' professional knowledge about what may impact on the topic area. The rationale for the selection of areas to be examined must be clearly articulated.

g. *The breadth of the inquiry*

Gathering multiple sources of data across a variety of settings helps to understand the ecology of children's learning and wellbeing in relation to the focus topic. Inquiries may be informed by the many views of children, teachers, family/whānau/'aiga and the wider community. Interaction among those who are invested in children's learning, including children, provides opportunities to create common ground, ultimately informing the development of learning environments that are culturally and socially relevant to children.

An ecological understanding does not necessarily lead to change activity directed at every level. It means that changes in close and immediate learning environments take into account the systems surrounding them. Of course, as ecological learning systems are dynamic, any changes made may, in turn, create ripple effects across the wider systems.

h. *Methods of data collection*

Methods of data collection are detailed and clarified before information is gathered. Data collection may include interviews, surveys, visual or audio techniques, observations, focus groups, meetings/hui/fono or more formalised assessment. Multiple data sources help to establish rich meaning in context rather than focusing on data in isolation. An essential element of data collection in the Situational Analysis is information about the positive supports and resources currently available. Without information about strengths, interests, aspirations, supportive relationships, effective systems and helpful artefacts in the learning environment, there is no platform on which to build new solutions.

i. *Planning of recording, analysis and data storage arrangements*

A key question to ask when planning to collect data is, "How will we as a group analyse the information?". Careful planning of questioning, recording and storing responses supports more straightforward processes of analysis and reliable measurement. Some questions are easy to record as they call for quantitative measures (e.g. mathematics scores) while others are qualitative and do not lend themselves as easily to being captured. However, they are of at least equivalent value. The hard-to-measure life experiences of children are often the most relevant to their learning (e.g. children's sense of identity, child well-being).

j. *Collecting the data*

Data collection is a busy period of interaction with people contributing information in multiple settings. Checking with participants that the recorded data reflects what they have said helps to ensure that the eventual analysis will authentically take into account their views. Data collection is often an iterative process as, at times, information collected gives rise to further questions and, therefore, extended data collection. Initial data collection may foreground what we already know or can easily access; it can also shed light on data that is missing or obscured by dominant discourses (e.g. expectations of groups of people, particular notions of wellbeing).

It is also not unusual to find that positive changes occur even before the data is fully analysed and any plan is implemented. This is because learning and change occur in the same moment (see Cooperrider & Whitney, 2007). As new insights gained from exchange of information lead to learning and the beginning of change, facilitators are advised to collect baseline information sooner rather than later. From the very first question asked, the situation changes, maybe a little, maybe a lot.

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3. Analysing and synthesising the data – making sense

Data analysis in the Situational Analysis involves layers of processing. The first is the analysis of each set of data and the identification of dominant themes emerging across all data sets (Step 6 – see a. b. & c. below). This is followed by a process of synthesis in which the dominant themes are linked to produce succinct, overview of the newly understood situation. From this synthesis, principles to guide new practices or solutions are derived (Step 7 – see d. & e. below). This stage of the Situational Analysis is pivotal and requires strong facilitation to ensure systematic processing of information. The process is described below.

a. *Analyse each set of data individually*

Initially each set of data collected (e.g. from interviews, surveys, focus groups) is analysed or summarised. For example, key messages provided by parents, teachers and children in surveys may be identified through coding and/or grouping of items that are conceptually similar. It is most likely that sets of data are analysed as interviews, surveys and other collection activities finish.

b. *Identify dominant themes emerging across all data sets*

Identification of dominant themes through the data is the pivotal point of the inquiry process. In this stage, those conducting the analysis (e.g. leaders and representatives of the participant group) look *across* the data collected from various sources through various means to identify the dominant themes. These become the dimensions of the analysis. Large amounts of data are crunched down in the process to produce a manageable number of key dimensions that will drive the remainder of the inquiry/research process. There is no right or wrong number of dimensions, they emerge from the data. However, as the purpose is to make the set of dimensions manageable and useful to the group, it is unlikely that the number would exceed seven, the estimated number, according to Miller's law, of items to which people can attend simultaneously (Miller, 1956). As each of the dimensions, being all parts of one whole, relate to the others, they can usually be merged to form fewer dimensions that are more easily managed. This does not mean that inquirers will want to intervene in every dimension identified. As explained later in this document, the synthesis of dimensions supports identification of pivotal dimensions that, if changed, will have either a direct or indirect impact on other dimensions.

c. *Practice-based evidence illustrated with examples from data*

Each dimension is illustrated with representative items from the data sets to justify the inclusion of the dimensions (e.g. convergence of children and teacher perspective as well as attendance information). This process assembles examples of evidence that led to the selection of each dimension and produces illustrations that can be helpful when communicating with the wider group of inquiry participants about the full meaning of each dimension.

The purpose of data analysis is to identify the actions, interactions, events, thoughts and feelings that impact on the learning and wellbeing of participants in specific environments. The resulting *practice-based evidence*, that is, the evidence of activity that is effective in the situations being examined, informs the creation of new practices and improvement. Restricting analysis to only those practices that have proved to work in previous times or in other settings serves to restrict innovation and contextualisation. Practice-based inquiry and interactive research differs from experimental research in that it does not isolate variables and seek to partial out those that are 'extraneous' or 'confounding'. That is not to say that previously observed successes cannot inform the inquiry, it simply means that they are insufficient alone. Findings from experimental research can help to inform interpretation and consequent practice change but must be supplemented with contextualised information regarding activity in a real world that is complex, interactive and dynamic (Green, 2008). Contextual variables and the interactions among them frequently offer the most relevant information about ways of making positive changes. The Situational Analysis process is expected to generate practice-based evidence through analysis of observations in context.

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d. Synthesis: Linking of dimensions to form the succinct overview.

Related dimensions are linked to show the connections and interconnections of the overall analysis. Each situation is viewed in its unique and different ways. Links made between dimensions are based on understandings gathered through the inquiry as well as relevant research, theory or cultural knowledge. While there is no single cause identified and all dimensions are seen to play a part in the dynamic situation depicted, the process of linking facilitates the prioritisation of the dimensions. This means that the most useful places to intervene, hubs or pivotal points, can be identified and affirmed by those involved. Participants' energy can then be focused where it can make the greatest difference, identifying those dimensions best addressed directly while others benefit indirectly and/or areas that might be valuable to target but not immediately. Targeted intervention ensures that activity is least-intrusive and most likely to preserve helpful supports. In the synthesis diagram below (Figure 2), the focus is on presence and engagement in school activity. The links between dimensions show how intervening in one dimension can lead to changes in others. In this particular situation, inquirers may select to attend to both perceived relevance of learning activity for life and health while effecting change in the other dimensions.
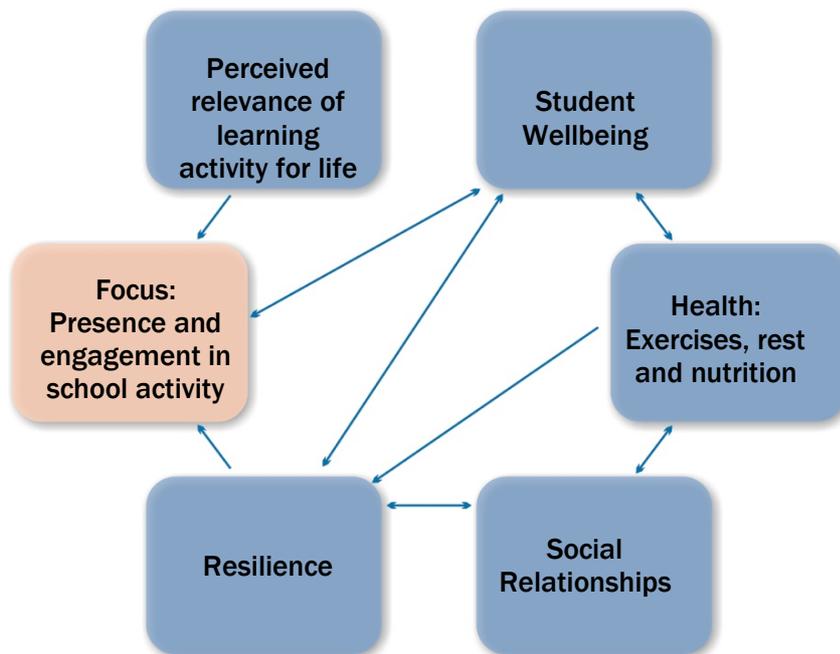

Figure 2: Synthesis of dimensions.

e. Extract principles for practice

The final part of the analysis and synthesis of data is to articulate the theory of action that will inform the 'taking action' stage. This means identifying the principles from the analysis above. These guide new practices. The principles represent the main theory or 'message' about effective action from the overall synthesis as well as each individual dimension. They can be presented as sets of phrases that indicate the elements that would be present were the changes to be effective. For example, "Student agency is increased when students have opportunities to take responsibility for learning", or, as in Figure 2 above, "Student engagement is supported when students perceive the relevance of learning activity".

4. Taking Action

The taking action stage is driven by principles that emerge from the synthesis of the data as explained above. This stage involves planning new activity (Step 8), implementing plans (Step 9) and checking for effectiveness of the inquiry activity in relation to the foci (Step 10). Conclusions are drawn about the effectiveness of the actions, new learning that has emerged, unexpected outcomes observed and whether or not a new cycle of inquiry will follow.

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a. *Create a plan*

Where possible and appropriate, participants take an active role in planning. New planned activity is detailed and builds on the supports identified in the 'setting up' and 'data gathering' stages. At this time, participants also note how they will later determine whether or not there have been changes in activity or practice (e.g. more teaching about reflective practice or greater opportunities to make choices). The distinction between the foci, which constitute desired outcomes or improvements, and the dimensions that will be developed must be kept in view when planning.

b. *Implement the plan*

Plans are implemented and, in the main, practices or strategies are carried out as planned. Although in different environments (e.g. home and school or across various classrooms) practices that reflect particular principles may differ, the common principles continue to drive practice. The principles constitute an inquiry's strengthened theory of change and the implementation period allows that theory to be tested.

c. *Review the plan*

Once the plan has been implemented, participants review the progress made in relation to the focus topic and note current practices. At this stage, participants make decisions about whether another cycle of inquiry is required or if the topic has been suitably addressed.

Making inquiry frameworks work

Selecting frameworks

The selection of frameworks of inquiry and research by practitioners is dependent on the theoretical perspectives of facilitators or leaders, the nature and size of inquiries and the sense-making processes of the people who participate. Inquiry frameworks may be problem-based, solution-focused and appreciative, highly controlled or more random and meandering. There is no one right way to inquire. Situational Analysis is most likely to be selected by those who view learning as something that happens within dynamic social and cultural contexts and are seeking a framework that encourages authentic, data supported decision-making. They may select this framework if they wished to build on strengths and supports, actively involving participants in the process. There are many frameworks of research and inquiry such as Action Research, Appreciative Inquiry, Spirals of Inquiry and an array of frameworks designed for children's inquiries. Most structured frameworks of inquiry reflect elements of the scientific method and can be devised specifically for inquiries by facilitators and participants. As some frameworks are more suitable for particular types of inquiries than others, facilitators may wish to become familiar with a range of those available.

Scoping an inquiry

The pivotal point of an inquiry is the analysis/synthesis stage and this can be made manageable and meaningful by prior care with scoping. The scoping of the inquiry starts at the outset of the process and determines the parameters through each stage. There is no one right size for an inquiry, but one thing is sure, what appears to be a narrowly focused topic at the beginning, most often expands and leads to a larger inquiry than anticipated.

Inquiries can be large and operate at across-school or agency systems level. They can also be lighter, carried out as part of regular professional practice to learn more about supporting individuals or groups. While circumstances may require practitioners to carry out large analyses over time and involve sizable participant groups, grand inquiries are not always necessary or suitable. There is much to be gained by carrying out smaller, focused inquiries, particularly when trialling new frameworks and methods or where topics are specific. Topics must be genuinely interesting to participants in order to maintain steady levels of energy for inquiries as they progress and inquiry processes must be meaningful and manageable for those

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facilitating and participating in them. A typical inquiry environment may comprise a range of broad and light examples.

Relationships and understandings

Inquiry frameworks are not processes that 'work' or 'don't work'. The understandings, actions, interactions and relationships associated with the use of frameworks determine success. Successful inquiry is largely a function of the actions occurring at the beginning of an inquiry. These actions include selection of applicable frameworks, careful negotiation, focusing, planning overviews of inquiry procedures, and detailing first steps, even though the findings cannot be foreseen. Successful professional collaboration also relies heavily on the relationships among participants. Effective relationships are dependent on several conditions, including the following.

- » High levels of trust, safety, mutual respect
- » Genuine, shared passion for and commitment to learning and growth sought through the inquiry
- » Optimism for what the inquiry will produce
- » Common expectations among colleagues about processes
- » Familiarity with the framework selected.

A successful inquiry demonstrates two clear features for its participants: new learning and a gratifying sense of having added value, making a difference.

Summary

Situational Analysis is an inquiry framework for research and professional practice and is one of many available for collaborative inquiry. It has broadened from its original application in psychologists' practice to accommodate the processing of information related to collaborations among various professional groups, including those in education and health.

The framework is broad and open, balancing key practice features with flexibility to allow each inquiry to adjust for various contexts of practice. The four principles of Situational Analysis - appreciative view, ecological perspective, data supported decision-making, and negotiated, collaborative participation - underpin every aspect of the inquiry cycle. The ecological perspective encompasses participants' interlinked, personal, social, and cultural connections at multiple levels, while the appreciative lens brings into view foundational supports on which to create new activity. Each step of the inquiry process calls for collaboration, appreciation and power-sharing. A critical operation within the Situational Analysis is analysis and synthesis, the identification of dimensions and understanding relationships among them. This operation generates a set of principles that represents a strengthened theory of action that underpins, and is assumed in, future practice. It enables practitioners-as-researchers to plan new activity in unique, unforeseen and data-informed ways. New practices and strengthened relationships emerge from practice-based evidence gained through the integration of information from within and outside of participants' immediate environments.

Situational Analysis is a framework that, used with integrity, can produce unpredicted solutions in complex social situations. However, frameworks do not work by themselves. The success of inquiries guided by the Situational Analysis, or any other form of inquiry selected, is supported when facilitators are confident about using the framework, are passionate and optimistic about finding solutions through the process and work collaboratively and respectfully with those who participate.

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