Disability as a Narrative Construction: Applying the Theory of Appreciative Inquiry

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Labels that highlight the negative aspect of the persona play a major role in the quality and extent of services in the field of special education. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) (2004), the law that governs the education of children with disabilities in the United States, educational services are provided to children if they have a disability. From an individual’s perspective, labels can hurt, stigmatize, marginalize and ostracize (Hahn 1993). Thus, there is a dichotomy in these two perspectives. The individual seems to urge the world to see beyond the negative label and appreciate his positive aspects whereas the state comes across as authoritarian, as though declaring that “Thou shalt not receive services unless thou has a disability label.” In this paper, I will draw from Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and, in particular, a focus on strengths to present two narratives – the state’s versus the individual’s. The individual narratives are drawn from my own experiences in the United States and India, and from my dissertation (Cousik, 2011).

Appreciative Inquiry was first used in 1985 by a team from Case Western Reserve University. The team focused on the positive aspects of a top-ranked hospital and “tapped into the organization’s positive core”. The proponents of AI believe that when any organization is evaluated based on its strengths rather than its faults; the very focus on the positive aspects of the organization is likely to motivate its members to do better (Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987; Bushe and Kassam 2005; Cooperider and Whitney 2005). The state would do well to invest its resources in enhancing individuals’ strengths – focus on what they can do, instead of highlighting their constraints. I will engage in further discourse about the tension/disparity between the individual voice and the authoritative voice of the state in the United States in relation to labeling – in particular, the duality of the voice of the IDEA 2004.

Inclusive spaces for personal narratives
How do we negotiate this tension? Is it possible for the dominant culture to let go of that power and create inclusive spaces for personal narratives by highlighting...
their strengths? Especially because policies for people with disabilities in developing countries like India are largely modeled around those in western countries, it is critical that discourse be generated about inclusion of suppressed voices of individuals in policy-making in western countries like the United States. It is hoped that such inclusionary discourses will resonate with policy makers in developing countries and they will begin to re-search and re-discover their own, positive, inclusionary practices within.

AI and labeling
Labels take birth when inquirers begin to look for problems. For example, most teachers routinely “screen” their students for negative behaviors that disrupt the flow of teaching and learning. When they find that some students are significantly different from the rest of the class, such students are referred for special education. Subsequently, these children re-enter the classroom with new, negative identities and become eligible to be “accepted”. Unfortunately, labels tend to promote a self-fulfilling prophecy in each child with the label. Gifted children, whose strengths are always in the foreground, receive more challenging assignments, whereas children with disabilities – because of their negative labels – are expected to be satisfied with less-than-mediocre curriculum content. Unfortunately, most labels become integral to the people who are entrusted with them and the stigma remains with them throughout their lifespan.

Therefore, instead of creating new labels, the focus should be on improving the quality of services being provided. By applying the principles of AI to the notion of labeling, I argue that service quality and effectiveness can be better determined by hearing the individual narratives – by focusing on their potential to be valuable contributors to the society, rather than viewing them as passive recipients of the state’s benevolence.

The story from the east
India has its fair share of labeling, as indicated by the wide use of the terms “mad,” “dumb,” “lame,” and “simpleton” in its ancient literature. I became familiar with the word “handicap” some time during the early 1970s because I happened to live very close to the largest mental hospital in South Asia. However, my experiences with my grandmother were devoid of labels.

I often attended her political, weekend meetings although I was unaware of the nature of these meetings. What was a sixth-grader doing at a political party meeting? I was escorting my grandmother who was going blind! She always wore dark glasses to protect her eyes from the sun’s glare, but no one called her a “blind woman”. If anyone did question, she would say “Oh! My eyes can’t see a little, but I am fine!” I realize now that she had found her own ways of coping with her gradual loss of vision – by forcing society to look at her positive aspects instead of acquiescing to a negative label.

Children who were slow to learn were able to merge into the society, unless their disability prevented them from independent functioning. Parents would declare that “he cannot read or write much, but is great at other things!” Similarly a deaf person “had some difficulty hearing properly” but could do other things. Thus, the focus seemed to be more on a person’s strengths than weaknesses.

This was also the case with my music teachers. One of them lived with her older sister’s family. She avoided eye contact and often smiled and talked to
herself. She was a tough task master and harsh in her reprimands. By today’s
classification, she had autism. But then, she was born in the 1940s when people
in India did not know the word autism. Her sister’s family had recognized her
positive abilities and had turned it into a vocation for her.

My second music teacher was a good singer and an instrumentalist. He had lost
one leg to polio but moved about independently. He had a very good reputation
as a vocal and instrumental teacher, and that was all that seemed to matter to
parents who sent their children to him. The system would now endow him with a
physical impairment.

The story from the west
Keith had been diagnosed with a speech and language disability. “Keith is a very
hands-on child! It is a God-given gift that he has. The teachers don’t understand
his learning style!” exclaimed his mother, Sara. When the teachers at the school
requested Sara’s permission to evaluate Keith because he was slow to learn,
she refused and rued that “…my child became dyslexic because of his speech
impairment! He does not need a psychological assessment! All he needs is
occupational therapy! Why can’t the school provide that?” Sara emphasized
Keith’s strengths. “He is a hands-on learner! They refuse to see that!” she
exclaimed.

Keith’s after-school program included attending the school’s partner program:
doing creative activities, occupational therapy, tutoring, playing with friends
in the neighborhood and learning to swim. Sara also reported that from the
time she started giving “special dietary multivitamins” to Keith, he had gained
twenty pounds and his health had improved tremendously. She believed that
the combination of the dietary supplement, therapy and his first grade teacher’s
support was responsible for his progress at school. Thus, Keith’s mother
constantly endeavored to provide him with positive experiences. Unfortunately
the school could not provide him appropriate services without a label.

Where the twain meet
Parents of children with disabilities, like Sara, bear the onus of coping with
the challenges of living in a society where labels that highlight the negative
determine the extent of support that children receive. Applying the principles
of AI to Sara’s narrative, it is clear that she wanted the system to recognize
his strengths and not burden him with new labels. According to IDEA (2004),
inclusion means the right to receive education in the regular education setting.
But inclusion must also mean emboldening and embracing individual narratives.
Like my grandmother, who did not think she was “blind” but merely “could not
see a little”, Keith’s mother expressed that “he was a hands-on learner and not
learning disabled”.

My grandmother’s voice
My grandmother’s voice had the opportunity to be heard because she was able
to highlight her strengths; in Keith’s case, it is essential that policy makers pay
respectful attention to his mother’s narrative and even encourage self-advocacy
from Keith as he grows older. Perhaps a day will soon arrive when the narratives
of people like my grandmother and Keith’s mother will create a snowballing
effect and gather enough strength to stem further labeling – a day when the
society is willing to recognize all that is positive in individuals.
Inclusion must also mean emboldening and embracing individual narratives.

References


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**Special AIP issues launched at the 2012 World Conference**

Two issues of AI Practitioner were created for the 2012 World Appreciative Inquiry Conference in Ghent, Belgium in April.

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