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Appreciative Inquiry for Inclusive Schools: Preliminary Results from a Scoping Review on Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)[1]

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Inclusion is widely recognized as one of the founding principles for the quality of educational institutions and it is strictly related to the ICF perspective. Actually, the conceptualization of educational needs is associated to the enhancement of everyone's strengths and potential, and to the influence the (physical and social) environment may have. For these reasons schools should pay attention on these factors and on what is positive to lead to transformative and generative processes that may promote inclusion. In this sense, a useful framework may be that of the Appreciative Inquiry as it is strength-based process through which people act in partnership to determine and co-create how to move an organization forward. Based on this premises, this contribution aims at exploring existing literature on the adoption of this strength-based approach in the inclusive educational field and presenting preliminary results of a Scoping review. The PRISMA-ScR checklist will be used to report the review and five databases and global search engines. As a final point, this preliminary investigation will pay special attention to the adoption of the Appreciative Inquiry to encourage full participation and learning process of students who use Virtual Learning Environment at school. Results show that only few studies adopt the AI in this specific educational field, but an interesting investigation propose the adaptation of the Appreciative Learning. Hence, more studies should be done to make clear how this process may support inclusive process.

Keywords: appreciative inquiry, inclusion, virtual learning environments, scoping review

Introduction

In contemporary education, inclusion is a fundamental goal for establishing fair and high-quality learning experiences. It ensures that every student, regardless of their background or abilities, has access to education according to their individual needs. Inclusive practices are linked with positive academic and social outcomes for all students, not only those with special educational needs or disabilities (Booth & Ainscow 2014; Aiello & Pace, 2020; Stainback & Stainback, 1990; UN, 2015). These practices foster a sense of belonging, respect for diversity, and readiness for life.

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An approach that may support schools in addressing these purposes is Appreciative Inquiry (AI; Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008), a strength-based approach that involves stakeholders in a collaborative effort to promote meaningful organizational change. Originating in organizational and management sectors, AI has been applied in education, providing a new perspective on addressing the educational community's needs. This approach emphasizes recognizing and utilizing the positive aspects and successful strategies within an educational environment. By doing so, it aims to initiate transformative and developmental processes, which align with the goals of inclusive education. Furthermore, AI may enable educators and institutions to recognize and build upon each student's unique contributions and potential, ensuring accessible, engaging, and individualized education. Hence, by focusing on effective practices, AI can create a positive, collaborative, and innovative learning environment that adapts to the diverse needs of all students.

Moreover, with the increasing use of technology in educational settings, AI may be employed to develop and enhance learning environments that are both effective and inclusive. In fact, the technological component, particularly the integration of multimedia and the adaptation across various digital platforms, plays a critical role in this context. The incorporation of AI into Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) is designed not only to improve the educational process but also to address both the diverse learning preferences and needs of students, and to foster greater engagement.

Based on these premises, the aim of this contribution is that of exploring the use of Appreciative Inquiry's (AI) strength-based approach in inclusive education, specifically in the setting of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs). The study's goal is to look at how AI might be utilized to improve the learning process and encourage students to fully participate in VLEs at school, with a particular emphasis on providing preliminary results from a scoping review. This research is founded on the idea that AI, as a strength-based process, may can significantly contribute to transformative and generative processes that promote inclusion in educational contexts.

Theoretical Framework

To date, the principle of inclusive education, which firstly gained worldwide attention with the Declaration of Salamanca in 1994 (UNESCO, 1994), spreads the light to the importance of giving all students the possibility to learn together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have. Consistent with it, the Italian educational policy anticipated these initiatives, because it provided for a unitary education system aimed at overcoming the dual track system (special schools and ordinary schools) to enhance the differences since 1970 (Aiello, 2015). Working in a single-track system require inclusive teachers and educational community to change their perspective on people with disabilities and other special educational needs, to adapt the context to their potentials and considering that their needs may arise because of various factors related to the individual, but also to the environment (social and physical). Therefore, it may be inferred that there is a strictly connection between this perspective and the way the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (WHO, 2001). It is fundamental in inclusive educational

context as explains disabilities by using bio-psychosocial model. More specifically, according to this paradigm, student with disabilities should not be labelled with their disease or disorder; whereas teachers and other professionals should consider how their full participation and learning process may be hindered (or not) by the context.

This hermeneutic approach bases its originality on a close link between personal factors and environmental one, in a holistic and systemic perspective, with the full enhancement of diversity, understood as values and resources. These considerations lead politics (UNESCO, 2005; UN, 2006) and researchers (Booth & Ainscow 2014, Aiello & Pace, 2020; Stainback & Stainback, 1990) to stress it and to point out that inclusion is a right of everyone, as everybody is entitled to a quality education, to actively participate to all the activities proposed within everyday life environments. To date, it has also become a crucial theme and objective of the Agenda 2030, specifically the 4th which invites to "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UN, 2015).

Moreover, as stated by Booth and Ainscow (2014, p. 18):

> The challenge posed by inclusion […] implies not simply «making room» for differences - in the name of an abstract principle of tolerance of diversity - but rather affirming them, put them at the center of educational action as the generative nucleus of life processes.

Actually, these principles emphasize the need to guarantee everyone the right to equity and accessibility to effective and quality training, regardless of disadvantaged situation. But it also means that who want to act inclusion should develop everyone potential, not just focusing on their disabilities or difficulties and let them be physically part of the environment but letting them be main character of its learning process, too.

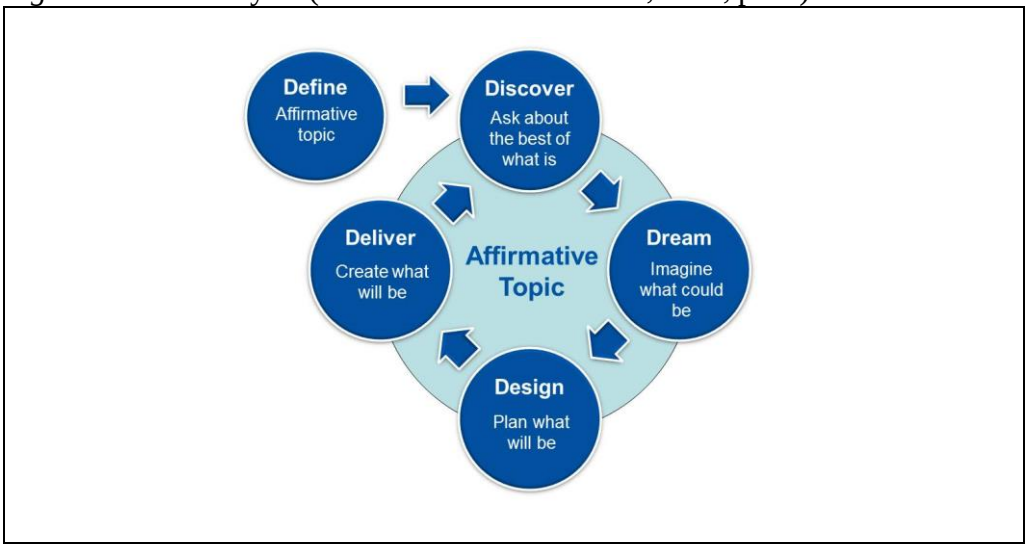
In this sense, schools *in primis* serve a pivotal role. It clearly emerges the need for teachers to plan and realize both well-structured and accessible learning environments (both in classrooms and within virtual environments) that suites peculiars and preferences of their students. Increasingly important is the idea that it is necessary to pursue forms of inclusive planning aimed at eliminating barriers to students' development and participation, as emphasized by the Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2011; Hall, Meyer, & Rose, 2012). According to this approach, attention should be paid to the potential of new technologies too, because of their multimedia characteristics that may be useful to support every different learning style, but also for their accessibility, thanks to the extreme flexibility and plurality of languages (European Agency for the Development of Education for Disabled Pupils, 2013). In fact, the use of technologies within Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) would facilitate both social participation and learning process (Calvani & Vivanet, 2014; Hamburg & Bucksch, 2015) if the teachers choose them by considering students' preferences, interests and opinion about it. In this regard, there is a rich national and international scientific literature on VLE (such as: augmented or virtual reality, serious game, edugame) that highlights the potential of these in offering educational opportunities, for instance to satisfy a variety of special educational needs, to develop several skills, to promote educational and social inclusion (Eow, Wan Zah, Rosnaini, & Roselan 2010; Astuti et al., 2021). Nonetheless is

important to clarify that it may be possible only if the teachers are aware that a practice is effective, not only when it is adopted and implemented by properly trained teachers, but also when there is an active involvement of the students (Eow, Wan Zah, Rosnaini, & Roselan 2010).

Based on these premises, the Appreciative Inquiry (AI; Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008) may be considered a potentially useful approach, because it is based on the analysis of the strengths, of what is positive within an organization to design a project aimed at changing, transforming and improving its practices. Even if it origins in the organizational and managerial field (Cooperrider-Strivastva, 1987) it is even used within the educational field (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). This hermeneutic approach begins with the analysis of the strengths of an organization and then builds a project aimed at change and transformative and improvement processes. According to it, the issue should be "what is working" or "when the organization was at its finest", rather than starting with "what is wrong" (Cooperrider-Strivastva, 1987).

The adoption of the AI is guided through two different phases. The first is the theoretical one and it is characterized by four principles: Constructionist; Simultaneity; Poetic; Anticipatory; Positiv of a social and collaborative co-construction of learning. The second is the operational phase. Either the first or the second underline the nature of the investigation for transformative purposes and are based on a circular process, known as "4D cycle" as it originates from the name of the individual corresponding phases, later integrated with one more preliminary phase (Cockell, & McArthur Blair, 2012) that take rise to the 5D-Cycle:

Figure 1. The 5D-Cycle (Cockell & McArthur Blair, 2012, p. 54)



The AI approach actively involves participants to the investigation as they are asked questions in a positive and rational way searching for improvements. Because of that, it is often used to change something in people and their behavior by defining the problems to be solved. Moreover, according to Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) appreciative research practices focus on the past and present capacities of the subjects to create possible future (Cooperrider et al., 2008). Hence, it seems to be an

interesting and useful method to employ, especially in relation to the construction of inclusion. According to it, it seems important to investigate if there are studies which have already explored the potential of AI to select and design VLE while adopting educational technologies to promote the teaching process-learning and inclusion of all students.

Methodology

Objectives

This review aimed to examine international research that made use of the AI to promote the teacher-learning process within VLE. At the same time, as reported in the theoretical framework, it aimed to investigate the opportunities arising from the adoption of this approach to improve the involvement of students who use digital artefacts, with the prospect of recognizing opportunities for promoting collaborative and inclusive processes.

Study Design

Given the exploratory nature of the objectives, the preliminary investigation was conducted by adopting the methodology of the Scoping Review (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Ghirotto, 2020; Heyvaert, Hannes, & Onghena, 2016). It consisted of a literature review aimed at detecting the state of the art in terms of breadth and depth of a phenomenon or a theme within a specific disciplinary field (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Ghirotto, 2020; Heyvaert, Hannes, & Onghena, 2016). This review process is used to assess the degree of evidence that is available, classify it and identify any gaps to detect the state of the art in terms of extensiveness of a phenomenon or a theme within a specific disciplinary field.

The review was carried out following the PRISMA-ScR protocol (Tricco et al., 2018) with the purpose of mapping key concepts, types of evidence and gaps in the AI area, systematically researching, selecting and synthesizing what exists as suggested by Colquhoun et al. (2014). The review was conducted following five phases: searching, screening, data extraction and charting, analysis and synthesis. The study's content and technique qualify it as mixed-methods research since the methodology employs a Scoping Review process, which combines parts of qualitative and quantitative research. This method was chosen because it is suitable for researching a wide range of literature, providing for an in-depth understanding of the issue and detecting gaps in previous research.

Search Strategy and Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

The systematic search was carried out using five international databases and search engines which are the most representative for the topic: ACM Digital Library, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, Worldcat. Moreover, the search was limited to studies published in English from 2000 and January 2022.

The key search terms were established iteratively as the reviewers became more acquainted with the topic. This search included the combination of: "Appreciative learning", "virtual learning environment", "videogames", "student agency", "educational technology", "edugame", "serious game", "virtual environment", "computer game", "technology-enhanced learning", "inclusion", "student engagement". The terms were combined using boolean operators "AND" and "OR".

Moreover, to be included, studies should meet at least one of the following criteria:

- adoption of Appreciative Inquire to promote inclusion within *Virtual Learning Environment;*
- adoption of Appreciative Inquire related to the use of edugame to foster skills development;
- research design: empirical research conducted in gropus, single case, use of qualitative and/or quantitative methods.

At last, gray literature (proceedings, thesis, doctoral dissertations, …), books, or studies published in other languages than Italian and English were not included for this preliminary research.

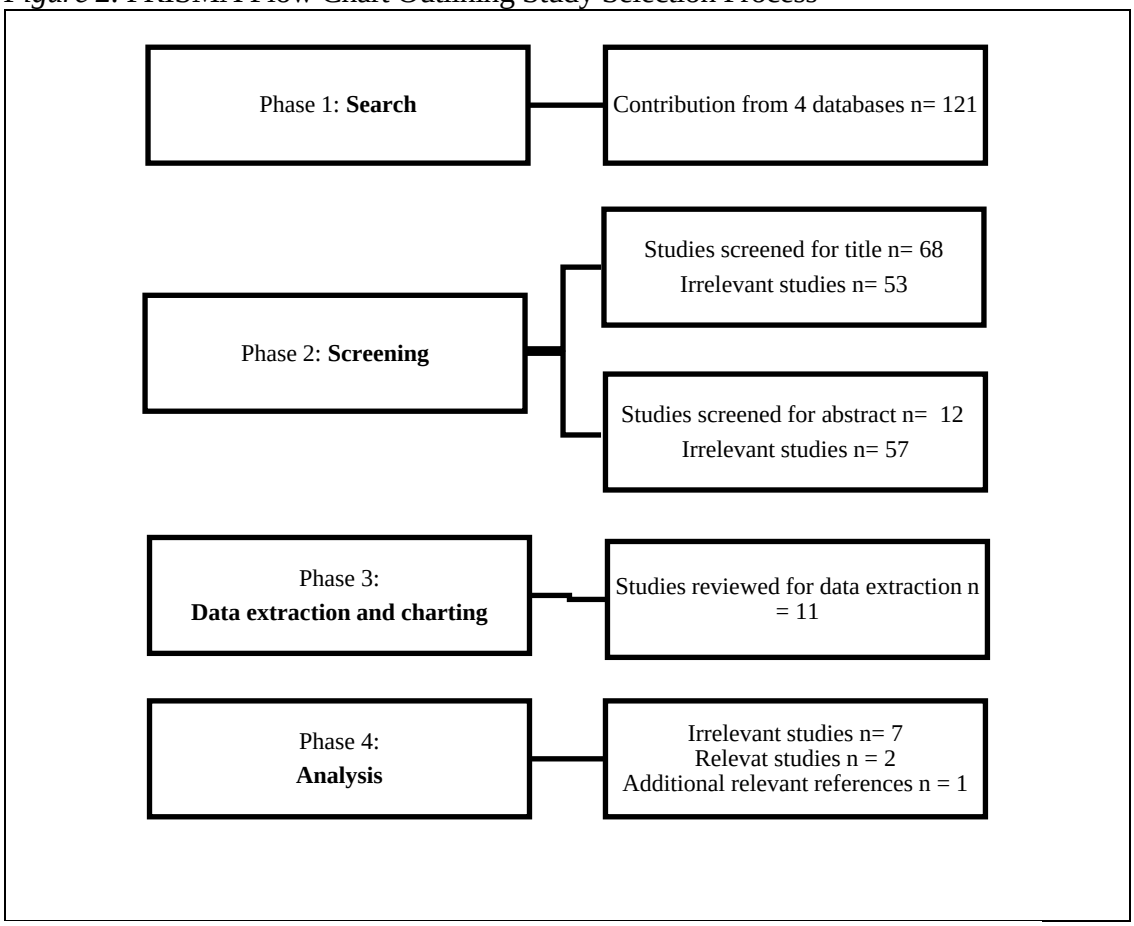
Selection Process, Data Charting and Extraction

A Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA; Liberati et al., 2009) flowchart (Figure 1) was created to clearly indicate how the included studies were chosen.

The search led to 121 contributions, screened by the researchers employing the inclusion criteria. It supported to assess the eligibility of the selected and identified studies. Later, the articles were screened according to title and abstract data (Prahladh, & van Wyk, 2020) and it led to select 12 relevant studies (Figure 2).

After that, full-text screening of all eligible articles, as Badger et al. (2000) pointed out, it was important to go further by reading the full text of the selected papers as abstract and title might not be representative. Then, a manual search was used to find studies that might not have been found in the primary searches (Hopewell et al., 2007). This required going over the reference lists from the screened studies.

Figure 2. PRISMA Flow Chart Outlining Study Selection Process



It led to the next phase: the data extraction of studies included (n. 11). This process was supported using a charting strategy based on the completion of a table (Table 1) where the researchers noted, for the relevant studies (n. 3):

- bibliographic information (author/s, year of publication)
- aims/purpose,
- study population and sample size (if applicable),
- methodology/methods,
- technology or VLE used (if applicable)
- key findings that relate to the scoping review question/s.

This charting procedure was useful to synthetize and interpret qualitative data cataloging and ordering the information in an analytical way according to key-themes (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).

Table 1. Description of the Included Article

Bibliographic information	**Aims/ purposes**	**Study population and sample size**	**Methodology/methods**	**Technology or VLE used**	**Key findings that relate to the scoping review question/s.**
Haryanto, Harisa, & Gamayanto (2021).	Appreciative Learning (AL) is used to design immersive experiences of games. Actually, these usually consist of sensory, imaginary and challenge-based immersion.	Not applicable	Overview of the Game Reward Model and AL for Reward System to develop an edugame prototype on Entrepreneurship Education with Role Playing Game (RPG) Genre.	Educational game	The researchers developed immersive experiences that may be characterized as sensory, creative, or challenge based. Adopting the AL they prepared a questionnaire that was given both to teachers and students who played the game to evaluate their experiences.
Eow, Wan Zah, Rosnaini, & Roselan (2011).	The study investigates the combination of the Appreciative Learning (AL) approach and Computer Game Development in enhancing students' creativity, in terms of the products created.	36 students randomly chosen from two schools in Kuala Lumpur (the capital of Malaysia).	This study employs three phases and both an action research technique (Greenwood & Levin, 2007) and a control group experimental design. The first phase explores the impact of the Appreciative Learning approach and Computer Game Development on the creativity of student output. The second and the third phase extend the examination of the influence of AI methods on the creation of computer games.	Computer-based learning tools	In this action research study, the importance of computer game development and AL was underlined as an efficient combination for encouraging students to think and act creatively. Thanks to the combination of AL and computer game production, students in the treatment group were able to develop much better game frameworks, game content, and game polishing than students in the control group. This may be explained by the fact that therapy group participants had more developed creative perception and creative processes. According to statistical analysis, evaluators students found that the treatment group's computer games in Phase I offered more novelty, arousal, and centrality qualities than the control group did. Except for the arousal dimension during Phase III in this study, results showed statistically significant increases in mean scores on all dimensions as evaluated by student evaluators from phase to phase. When given the chance, students proved their ability to come up with appealing and original ideas. In conclusion, it was found that the AL approach and game development had the potential to give students opportunities to express themselves creatively via the games they create.
Eow & Baki (2010).	The contribution aims to look at a combination of technology, pedagogy, and creativity through computer games development and Appreciative Learning (AL)approach.	36 Malaysian students (13-14 years old). Sample strategy used: randomized subjects.	The rationale for employing control group experimental design derived from an effort to assess the efficacy of an AL technique employed in a computer game creation activity with the objective of developing students' creative perspectives. The overall Creative Perception Index (CPI) score, WKOP (What kind of person are you?), and SAM (Something About Myself) score were computed using a modified Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistical test for normality.	Computer-based learning tools	Students in the AL approach group (treatment) exhibited a significantly higher Creativity Perception Index as compared to the control group. The facilitator's learning environment, which placed an emphasis on supportive, helpful and unrestricted directed autonomy for students to grow with more self-fulfillment, may be responsible for the treatment group's significantly higher score. Further studies might evaluate a wider range by setting the proportion of male and female participants to be even before the trial begins. Second, the study was rather condensed (4 weeks or 16 hours of interaction). The arrangement should be longitudinal.

Results and Discussion

The analysis showed that the most cited author was Barrett (1995) who explained that an appreciative approach may foster several specific skills, all linked to the dimension of the positive, generativity and collaboration between members of an organization, while using action-research methodology. Moreover, Drew et al. (2014) emphasized the coherence of AI to the principles of positive psychology, (Seligman, 1996) of leadership and complex systems theory, too. According to the objectives of this contribution three main themes were identified: *Conceptualization and Appreciative inquiry framework; Appreciative inquiry, technologies and VLE; Appreciative inquiry inclusion and education.*

Conceptualization and Appreciative Inquiry Framework

Eow, Zah, Rosnaini, and Roselan (2011) analyzed the potential of AI in the educational field. More specifically, they explained how its phases may be adopted to promote the learning process. In fact, the relevance of this study depended on the opportunity to *recalibrate* the learning approach, enhancing students' potential and motivations, putting them at the center of their training process by adopting the AI as a new pedagogical alternative.

According to Eow, Wan Zah, Rosnaini, and Roselan (2011) it may be possible to implement the 4D cycle to promote greater flexibility to face the technological advancement. Moreover, they decided to add three more theoretical principles, taking account to further research on this topic (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006), which are the:

- *Wholeness Principle,*
- *Enactment Principle,*
- *Free Choice Principle*.

The last one was considered by the authors as the most useful and suitable within Asian educational context, where there are specifical conventional methods to teach and learn that sometimes give raise to disciplinary problems.

Appreciative learning approach proposed by the authors as a new pedagogical option for educational setting is based on AI. There are a number of applications of this approach in the educational field (Morsillo & Fisher, 2007; McAdam & Mirza, 2009; Yballe & O'Connor, 2000; Filleul & Rowland, 2006). Empirical evidence therefore demonstrates how appreciative inquiry is applied to the school world involves both an increase in knowledge and a changing behaviors and attitudes. Indeed, the appreciative inquiry can provide an alternative paradigm for creating teaching experiences generative and positive. In this way the didactic action is constantly redefined by the teacher and yes responds to the needs of the individual by making him a participant and involved. The students feel part of a project designed by them and for them.

Appreciative Inquiry, Technologies and VLE

Interesting results were about the adoption of the AI in combination with videogames with the aim of promoting: learning process and participation. Above all, Haryanto's research group (Haryanto, Ardiawan & Gamayanto, 2021; Haryanto, Rosyidah, & Kardianawati, 2019) used the AI framework to implement role-playing videogames with educational purposes. Their research projects aimed to foster learning, while using serious games and adopting the AL. This peculiar framework was actually used to design immersive experiences using all the four phases of the 4D model to let the players practice sensory, imaginary, and challenge-based experiences that supported them on focusing on positive elements, such as achievements and opportunities. The authors found out that the appreciative approach showed its effectiveness in modeling and categorizing reward behavior.

Likewise, Eow, Wan Zah, Rosnaini, and Roselan (2011) investigated how to improve students' creativity by implementing the appreciative learning approach. Its 4D cycle was employed as a pedagogical strategy to improve the students' perception of their creativity. The sample was composed of 69 Malaysian students, between 13 and 14 years of age, which was divided into two groups. With the treatment group the Appreciation-Based Learning (AI) approach was used, whereas a self-learning approach was applied with the control group. Results showed that the students of the treatment group achieved a mean score of 71.82, which was significantly higher at a significance level of 0.05 than the mean score of 50.49 exhibited by the control group. According to the authors, the stages of the appreciative learning approach may have encouraged students in self-awareness and freedom of self-expression.

Later, the scholars (Eow, Wan Zah, Rosnaini, & Roselan 2011) conducted another study with the aim to investigate the combination of the appreciative learning approach and the development of computer games to foster creativity skills development. The sample consisted of 36 pupils from two Malaysian schools, with some similar characteristics in terms of age, gender, computer proficiency, years of experience playing computer games, time spent a week playing virtual games and creative perception. Compared to the previous study, the steps of the 4Ds were modified with the intention of leaving students freer to express the awareness of their own actions in an autonomous and personal way. Alternative tools to support group discussion of 10 minute, such as the logbook, were used to preserve privacy and accommodate students with greater intrapersonal reflection skills. During the phase three of the 4D cycle, it was preferred to replace the discussion time to encourage collaboration through small group work. In general, the effectiveness of the AL was proved when the students were asked to highlight the positive aspects.

Appreciative Inquiry Inclusion and Education

At last, two studies conducted by Ronald Calabrese (2006, 2008) were considered relevant to the purpose of this investigation. The first one was cited into Eow, Wan Zah, Rosnaini, and Roselan (2011) contribution because the researchers employed the AI to investigate how much social inclusion may be encouraged while adopting

the *Circle of Friends Program* (COFP) for students with disabilities. The COFP (2006) is an initiative aimed to improve social inclusion through a mentoring program that involve young people with disabilities and peers. The study involved six schools, four school districts in the Midwestern state, ten school sponsors, eight mentors and friends as well as parents of children served by COFP. The results of this study showed an improvement of social inclusion of students with disabilities. Furthermore, parents felt more integrated and less isolated, and it supported change process. Finally, the last study of Calabrese (2006) envisaged the application of the AI in relation to the relationship between school and university in American contexts. This research aimed to explore the ecology of collaboration between schools and universities through an appreciative inquiry-theoretical perspective, to demonstrate how it increases social capital in school and university partnerships. Results highlighted that the application of appreciation inquiry as a theoretical perspective improved public school-university relationships and promoted sustainable partnerships as it reduced focuses on issues and ab attention to on human potentials.

Conclusion

The scoping review's findings indicate that despite its limited current usage in this educational sector, Appreciative Inquiry's employment in Virtual Learning Environments shows promise for boosting student involvement and creativity. This is particularly apparent when AI is merged with educational technologies like serious games and immersive experiences, which have proven effective in advancing learning and inclusivity. However, as the research is still in its emerging stages, there is a call for more exhaustive investigations to thoroughly understand AI's impact on enhancing inclusive education and in VLEs, with a special focus on expanding this research within European contexts.

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