Letter to the Editor

Appreciative Inquiry Approach in Evaluation of Medical Education Programs: Definition and Application

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Evaluating educational programs in medical science is a dynamic way to identify challenges in the teaching-learning process which provides useful evidence for policy makers. Most studies on educational program evaluation have used approaches that focus on deficits and problems. Deficit-based or problem-based approaches look for problems by raising questions such as "What are the problems in the program? ", " What are the wrong processes? ", and " What processes need to be corrected? " (1) Johnson (2014) concluded that over-focusing on weaknesses makes participants feel more frustrated and reduces their involvement, job commitment, and motivation. As a result, it exacerbates adverse conditions and leads to program failure (2).

In contrast, the appreciative inquiry approach to evaluating educational programs increases the participation of the stakeholders of the program in the evaluation process, development of innovative ideas, and an increased sense of ownership and commitment to the program by seeking out the positive aspects of the program. This approach investigates the program outcomes via producing a positive energy required to make changes, leading to sustainable development through the participants' involved in the program (3). The appreciative inquiry approach has the potential to be used in the evaluation and development of medical education programs. It has been used in various fields of science, including medical education, to evaluate the effectiveness of educational interventions and organizational development (4).

The appreciative inquiry approach consists of four phases including discover, dream, design, and destiny or deliver. In the discovery phase, questions are asked about the most positive moments, the best experiences, the peak of success, and the values and aspirations of the participants (4). After sufficient data collection, they should be analyzed, and the factors that have contributed the most to the previous accomplishment of the program, such as those items pertaining to the questions of: "What is most desirable? ", " What is most motivating to individuals? ", " What inspires the most pride? ", must be identified. The information obtained from this phase determines the evaluation objectives of the educational program. Meanwhile, throughout this evaluation, the cooperative effort for organizational development may be gradually initiated and continued during the subsequent phases (5).

The dream phase seeks to create a favorable vision for the future. In this phase, questions such as "How the positive factors identified in the discovery phase must be obtained or reinforced? ", " What is your ideal program?", "What is your dream for that program? ", " How is this ideal program organized? ", " What is the role of each participant? ", " What would you do? ", How has your setting changed? ", and " What short-term and long-term procedures should be taken in this ideal program? " are engulfed. This phase is based on this principle that "The most important resources for organizational development are collective dreams and discourse about the future" (6).

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When the participants have agreed on the dream, it can be taken to the design phase. The purpose of this phase is deciding how to achieve the dream. In design phase, the key question is " How do we want to build this desirable future? " (4). In the meantime, the participants have to work together to develop a plan to achieve the ideal conditions. This plan answers a chain of questions as: " What resources are needed? ", "What are the required specialties? ", " What actions do you suggest to achieve the desired future? ", " What is the timetable? ", and last but not least " What are the groups ' vs. Individuals ' commitments in this plan? " (6). The design phase is based on this principle that " Positive changes occur when we have a plan to achieve the ideal future ... the future is here ... we build the future at the moment with our words, our imaginations, and our relationships" (7).

In the destiny or deliver phase, the participants have started their activities in order to achieve the ideal program (5). The plans and goals are defined, and the participants implement the action plan obtained from the previous phases. The result of this phase is a wide range of changes in the organization. The most effective questions in the final phase are " How will we recognize that we have reached the desired future? ", " How will that future look, and how will it feel? ", " How will the future program or organization be different from the present one? "(6).

The results of a study by Gaskin et al (2017) pointed out that the appreciative inquiry approach comprises a valuable tool for teamwork with a positive spirit which is achieved by dreaming about the future and increasing engagement and participation (8). The findings of a study by Fileborn et al (2020) stated that this approach improves the quality of education and increases student participation in the education process (9). Amundsen et al (2020) demonstrated that appreciative inquiry approach has led to improvement and an increase in the students' amount of participation in the curriculum. Their study also reported an improvement in the quality of faculty development programs as another positive effect of this approach (10). The earlier recommendations on implementation of evaluation approaches in education justify why and how these programs work (11).

The appreciative inquiry approach maintains that reflecting on strengths enhances the commitment, creativity, motivation, hope, and brings about a source of positive energy which is necessary for future accomplishment. Therefore, it is recommended that upcoming studies in the medical education take a meticulous implementation of appreciative inquiry approach in order enjoy the benefits of the individual and organizational capacities in the realm of medical education.

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