

Promoting Shared Decision Making through Descriptive Inquiry

RACHEL SEHER

City-As-School, New York

CECELIA TRAUGH

Bank Street College of Education

ALAN CHENG

City-As-School, New York

Introduction

This article describes the process through which faculty members at City-As-School, a progressive public high school in New York City, recently began to use descriptive inquiry to more fully actualize one of the school's core values: a commitment to "democracy as a way of life" (Dewey 1939, 2). Descriptive inquiry is a democratic knowledge-making process that was developed at the Prospect School in North Bennington, Vermont, and is captured in the writings of Patricia Carini and *Prospect's Descriptive Processes* (Prospect Center 2002). Guided by a group of teacher leaders, the faculty of City-As-School began to use descriptive inquiry in the 2016–17 school year. Faculty members met regularly in study groups during Friday morning faculty meetings and examined student work using descriptive processes. The teacher leaders planned and led the study groups in collaboration with the school leadership and with the support of an experienced practitioner of descriptive inquiry.

This article shows that this collaborative work deepened shared decision making, which is a central value of all progressive schools, and an aspect of a "democratic way of life" (Dewey 1939, 2). Using descriptive inquiry moved the faculty of City-As-School toward more careful listening to colleagues'

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differing points of view, giving all voices a chance to be heard and making students and their differences more visible. Such skills and habits are necessary for democratic participation and shared decision making. At a deeper level, using descriptive inquiry helped the staff of the school to navigate a course between unilateral decision making by the school leadership, at one extreme, and teacher-driven decision making that did not clearly build toward a vision for the whole, at the other extreme. Specifically, the leadership of the school made the decision to use descriptive inquiry across the school, and teacher leaders collaborated with the school leadership to decide how to use this disciplined inquiry process in light of faculty input and interests. This sort of role differentiation at the start of the work with descriptive inquiry was vital to this inquiry process taking root at City-As-School, which ultimately deepened shared decision making.

A Methodological Note

The methodological approach taken in this article is grounded in a commitment to using action research by educational practitioners to improve practice and transform schools in ways that are equitable and just. Systematic action research by practitioners not only ensures that educational decisions and research reflect the voices and knowledge of those “closest to the classroom” but also provides practitioners with the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of their practice, to articulate “a rationale or philosophy of practice” (McCutcheon and Jung 1990, 148) and to reflect upon and refine practice in light of that rationale or philosophy. Much like descriptive inquiry, action research by “practitioners trying to improve their practice” represents a vital shift away from dominant research paradigms “that emphasize an outside-in, top-down approach to educational change” (Anderson et al. 2007, 7). Indeed, descriptive inquiry and action research have similar epistemological foundations, including the belief that knowledge is partial; that bringing together multiple perspectives is necessary to more fully understand a topic or subject; and that the questions and experiences of students, parents, and teachers in schools is vital to inquiry that promotes equity and justice.

Two of the authors of this article are instructional leaders at City-As-School, and the other is the experienced practitioner of descriptive inquiry who supports the inquiry work in the school. We draw on detailed meeting notes taken in both planning sessions among the teacher leaders and faculty study group meetings throughout the 2016–17 school year in describing our work with descriptive inquiry. The narrative developed and the conclusions

drawn reflect the perspective of the authors, which is necessarily partial yet uniquely situated to describe the work.

Ideally, the story of our inquiry work would be told from multiple perspectives and include multiple points of view. This would not only offer a fuller picture of our work with descriptive inquiry but also would reflect our commitment to shared decision making and democratic knowledge creation. A teacher at City-As-School might have a different experience of the inquiry work than a supervisor or experienced practitioner leading the work. Our own “positionality” within City-As-School shaped our experience of the inquiry work and the description that we offer in this article (Anderson et al. 2007, 9). Unfortunately, “few practitioners working in school settings currently get release time for research” (Anderson et al. 2007, 12). Our hope is to create time and space during the school day to gather teachers’ perspectives after another year of inquiry work. This will allow us to include the direct voices of the teachers and teacher leaders in telling the story of our work with descriptive inquiry and, ultimately, in refining the work. Although the narrative developed in this article is necessarily bounded because it is told from our own stance as practitioners within a hierarchical organization, it nevertheless offers a valuable practical example of how one school community used descriptive inquiry to deepen shared decision making.

School Context: The Decision to Use Descriptive Inquiry at City-As-School

City-As-School is a public experiential learning school in New York City’s West Village that serves young people between the ages of 17 and 21 who have become disconnected from schooling. The school serves approximately 600 students from across New York City’s five boroughs and has 50 full-time staff members. The school was initially founded in 1972 by Fred Koury and a planning team comprising teachers and students as a “school without walls.” In its early years as an “experimental high school” (*New York Times* 1973, 37), City-As-School did not offer classes, and all learning occurred through credit-bearing internships across New York City. The school is a member of the New York Performance Standards Consortium (known as the Consortium), and students graduate by demonstrating “accomplishment in analytic thinking, reading comprehension, research writing skills, the application of mathematical computation and problem-solving skill, computer technology, the utilization of the scientific method in undertaking science research” (Consortium 2003) and more through performance-based assess-

ment tasks (PBATs) instead of high-stakes standardized exams. Over time, classes were added to the school schedule to support PBAT development. For example, social studies portfolio classes with titles such as “Reconstruction,” “The Atomic Bomb,” and “Democracy in Action” provide students with the opportunity to explore a specific topic within the field of social studies while developing a research paper that uses multiple primary and secondary sources to generate and support a thesis. A research paper developed in one such class can be revised and presented as a social studies PBAT. Currently, students participate in internships for half of the week and take classes in the school building that support the development of portfolio pieces for the other half. Core values of City-As-School that have been articulated in various conversations and documents since its founding include agency, freedom, trust, responsibility, mutual respect, critical thinking, creative self-expression, and community mindedness.

We (Alan and Rachel) decided to bring descriptive inquiry to City-As-School very deliberately at the start of the 2016–17 school year, which was our fifth year working together as instructional leaders of the school. We made this decision for two interrelated reasons. First, we wanted a school-wide inquiry process that could help to ground our meetings and root educational decisions in the experiences and work of our students. We did not have an inquiry process in our school at the time, which limited our ability to engage in deep and meaningful professional learning, and our teacher leaders had asked for more guidance from us in structuring meeting time. Second, and related, we hoped that descriptive processes could help adults in the school work together more constructively. We wanted to foster active listening, respectful dialogue, and equitable participation in meetings and, in doing so, lay the foundation for deepening shared decision making in our school. We saw this latter goal as central to our school’s commitment to democracy and shared decision making. The year before beginning our work with descriptive inquiry, our two-day faculty retreat in June focused on shared decision making, and we successfully applied for a grant to explore and develop a model of “distributed leadership” (Natsiopoulou and Giouroukakis 2010) for our school.

Both these purposes are related to the school’s deep commitment to democratic education; however, the focus of this article is the second purpose—the enactment of more democratic decision making.

Our efforts to deepen shared decision making met with varied success in the years leading up to our decision to use descriptive inquiry. When we (Alan and Rachel) first began working together at City-As-School, few formal structures for shared decision making existed. The three existing de-

partments met bimonthly to share highlights of individual work and discuss business items. These three departments were the internship department, comprising 12–15 full-time teachers who coordinate student internships; the advisory department, comprising 22 classroom teachers who also serve as advisors to students; and the guidance department, comprising 5–7 full-time school counselors. The cabinet, which is a consultative group to the principal, also met weekly and typically reported back key information from departments and offered input into decisions made by the principal. This group included (and still does) the principal, assistant principals, chairs of the three major departments, and the United Federation of Teachers' chapter leader. These groups did not make decisions with school-wide implications, and some did not have or follow meeting agendas.

Over the past six years, we (Alan and Rachel) have gradually created formal structures for shared decision making and increased opportunities for faculty to shape school-wide policy and practices. The original three departments now meet weekly, and the facilitators work with their department colleagues to create meeting agendas that involve a combination of professional learning and shared decision making regarding curricula and other departmental matters; the advisory department, for example, discusses and approves advisory events such as our school-wide town hall meetings. Faculty members also now meet in subject teams weekly to share materials and resources, to explore questions of practice, and to make decisions about course offerings and curricula. We have also created several committees with open membership that shape specific school policies and practices. For example, we formed the professional development committee to provide faculty members with the opportunity to influence our professional development plan and activities. This committee, with membership that overlaps with our team facilitators but includes additional members, plans and leads Friday morning faculty meetings.

Despite these strides, we still struggled with shared decision making before beginning to work with Cecelia to use descriptive inquiry in our school. Some members of the faculty felt that we (Alan and Rachel) exercised too heavy a hand in decision making, even after teams and committees existed. At the same time, faculty members did not always participate in ways that lent themselves to making decisions for the good of the whole. Active listening, respectful dialogue, and constructive conflict were not always present in meeting spaces, with some faculty members attacking others and individuals leaving meetings in tears at times. Because of this, we (Alan and Rachel) did, in fact, take an active role in meetings and made school-wide decisions without consulting the faculty.

Beneath these surface tensions, a deeper one existed between individual teacher autonomy and our ability to maintain a vision for the school as a whole that we struggled to navigate productively. An example of this is our school-wide instructional work. Our school is part of the Consortium and, as such, has made an explicit commitment to align classes and internships to PBATs and common rubrics created and maintained by our network of schools. In our first two years working together at City-As-School, we (Alan and Rachel) noticed that although some faculty members built classes and internships around projects aligned to the Consortium's rubrics, others gave tests and taught from textbooks or simply required students to complete enough worksheets to justify awarding academic credit. We responded by requiring everyone to build classes and internships around projects aligned to the Consortium's rubrics; we reinforced this decision through classroom observations and individual work with teachers. Our rationale was that tests and worksheets were not consistent with our vision and values as a school. Despite the rationale, our decision was met with a good deal of resistance from many faculty members. Those who disagreed with our decision most vocally included our colleagues who were most active in the teachers' union; they argued for individual teachers to have the freedom to work in their preferred mode and style, even if that meant giving tests and worksheets. We used our positional authority to reinforce a project-based approach aligned with the Consortium's rubrics despite teacher resistance, and now curriculum and pedagogy across the school are conceptualized within a project-based framework. Some faculty members still believe that we wrongly impinged on the autonomy of individual teachers.

Similar tensions emerged in the professional development committee before our work with Cecelia to use descriptive processes. In the first year that the committee existed, we (Alan and Rachel) made unilateral decisions about the focus of our Friday morning faculty meetings and professional development plan. This caused consternation among faculty on the committee and lessened investment to the point that the committee met only periodically that first year. In the committee's second year, we focused on increasing investment among committee members by ensuring that they truly had a hand in planning and leading Friday morning faculty meetings. This came at the expense of any kind of school-wide work; instead, we offered workshops and sessions on topics as varied as layered curriculum, writing across the curriculum, mindfulness training, and trauma-sensitive practices. The committee thrived in its investment, but our faculty meetings lacked coherence, and we did not feel that our perspective as school leaders was seen or included.

We (Alan and Rachel) learned about descriptive inquiry in spring 2016 during the second year of our work with the professional development committee. Colleagues at Bank Street College of Education introduced us to writings by the new dean, Cecelia, who is one of the authors of this article. Cecelia has a long history of working with schools to use descriptive processes. We (Alan and Rachel) quickly shared some of Cecelia's writings along with excerpts from *Prospect's Descriptive Processes* with our school's teacher leaders, who meet weekly as a group. This group facilitates subject-area teams and departments, and its membership overlaps with the professional development committee. The teacher leaders were as intrigued by descriptive inquiry as we were. Based on this initial interest, Rachel participated in the Institute for Descriptive Inquiry that summer and read the three central books on descriptive processes, *Starting Strong* (Carini 2001), *Jenny's Story* (Carini and Himley 2010), and *From Another Angle* (Himley and Carini 2000). Cecelia and Rachel then met in August 2016 to talk about the possibility of Cecelia supporting City-As-School in beginning to use descriptive processes that coming year. Cecelia agreed, and Alan and Rachel decided to focus on bringing descriptive inquiry to the school in 2016–17. The central reasons we (Alan and Rachel) hoped to integrate descriptive processes into our work was that we believed they would provide structure, reinforce equitable and inclusive modes of participation, help us ground practice in a deeper understanding of our students, and help us navigate the tension between individual freedom and a vision for the whole.

Situating Our Work: Descriptive Inquiry and Democracy in Progressive Schools

Democracy as a Central Goal of Progressive Schools

Like other progressive schools, City-As-School traces its roots to the work of early progressives such as John Dewey and Lucy Sprague Mitchell, who advocated for the holistic development of the person through experiential learning in a democratic society. Progressives believe that education should be “an experience that enhances and nurtures” each child's capacities; they seek to foster learning through authentic “experiences” rather than “formalized” classroom activities and to adapt their practices to “the individual child.” Their belief is that children flourish through “creative and positive work rather than competitive experience” (Biber et al. 1942, 17–18). The development of democratic habits and capacities is a vital outgrowth of this process.

Dewey (1939) makes this latter point explicitly in an essay written toward the end of his life in response to the rise of fascism in Europe. For democracy to flourish, he maintains, schooling cannot be separate from the experience of democratic life. This is because a vibrant democracy requires certain attitudes, habits, and dispositions on the part of individuals: “Democracy is a personal way of individual life” that “signifies the possession and continual use of certain attitudes, forming personal character and determining desire and purpose in all the relations of life” (Dewey 1939, 2). Democracy is not simply a set of institutions and necessitates certain character traits: “Institutions are expressions, projections and extensions of habitually dominant personal attitudes” (2). Without the necessary “dispositions and habits” (2), democratic political institutions will not function as such and may even cease to exist.

Dewey (1939) describes the human characteristics necessary for democracy as follows: “A genuinely democratic faith in peace is faith in the possibility of conducting disputes, controversies and conflicts as cooperative undertakings in which both parties learn by giving the other a chance to express itself, instead of having one party conquer by forceful suppression of the other . . . To cooperate by giving differences a chance to show themselves because of the belief that the expression of difference is not only a right of the other persons but is a means of enriching one’s own life-experience, is inherent in the democratic personal way of life” (3).

For Dewey (1939), such character traits are not intrinsic but must be developed. He argues not for “faith in human nature in general” but for “faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action if proper conditions are furnished”; this “belief . . . brings with it the need for providing conditions which will enable these capacities to reach fulfillment” (2).

Creating the conditions necessary for the development of democratic character thus becomes a central task of experience and education, which for Dewey (1939) are intertwined to the point that they are one and the same. “Since the process of experience is capable of being educative, faith in democracy is all one with faith in experience and education” (3), he writes. Put simply, individuals develop the habits and traits necessary for democratic participation through the experience of democracy itself. Dewey conceptualizes the experience of democracy as “free interaction of individual human beings with surrounding conditions, especially the human surroundings, which develops and satisfies need and desire by increasing knowledge of things as they are” (3). Through free interactions with others and with their surroundings in a democracy, individuals develop democratic character.

Significantly, the experience of democratic social life cannot be periodic or episodic; it must be ongoing. Dewey (1939) says, “For every way of life that fails in its democracy limits the contacts, the exchanges, the communications, the interactions by which experience is steadied while it is also enlarged and enriched. The task of this release and enrichment is one that has to be carried on day by day” (4). Daily and ongoing participation with others in democratic life is the experience needed to develop the habits and dispositions necessary for such participation. Schooling cannot be distinct from democratic social life.

Deborah Meier (2002), the founder of Central Park East 1 (CPE1), the celebrated progressive elementary school in New York City, echoes Dewey’s thinking in her widely read book, *The Power of Their Ideas*. Meier argues that a public education system rooted in the progressive practices used at CPE1 is vital to a healthy democracy. According to Meier, “Ideas—the ways we organize knowledge—are the medium of exchange in democratic life. . . . Democracy is based on our power to influence by our public statements and actions what we want the future to look like” (8). “Children,” she says, “grow up and the kinds of habits of mind they bring to both the workplace and the polling place will determine our common fate” (6). Public schools, she continues, can shift “the odds in favor of such democratic principles” as “equity, civil rights [and] mutual respect for the ideas of others” (7). They “can train us for such political conversations across divisions of race, class, religion and ideology . . . Both teachers and students need to search for metaphors that work across ideological, historical, and personal differences” (7). Meier concludes, “It’s quite possible that American society can develop a viable economy that ignores the fate of a vast number of citizens, one not dependent upon a universally well-educated public. But only at a cost to democracy itself” (6).

Without a public school system that truly fosters democratic habits of mind, democracy ceases to function. Progressive approaches to education are central to this project. Descriptive inquiry is one way that progressive schools can more fully live their commitment to providing experiences with democracy and fostering democratic habits and dispositions.

Descriptive Inquiry

Descriptive inquiry was initially created by the staff of the Prospect School, a small independent school that served elementary- and middle-school-aged children from 1965 to 1991 in South Bennington, Vermont.

Descriptive inquiry involves attending to children and work and describing them from myriad angles and perspectives. Multiple rounds of close description are at the heart of descriptive process and form the basis for subsequent interpretive rounds, which involve asking questions such as, “What have we learned about the child and her values, beliefs, and preferences?” “What have we learned about how to best support this child’s learning and growth?” “What are the implications for our practice?” All descriptive processes involve looking closely and describing in detail before turning to focusing questions. Descriptive review of a child, for example, involves portraying a particular child according to “her physical presence and gesture, disposition and temperament, connections with others (both children and adults), strong interests and preferences, and modes of thinking and learning” (Prospect Center 2002, 10) to create a fuller picture of the child and think of ways to best support his or her learning and growth. Descriptive inquiry can also be used to examine an article or book chapter, a video, teacher work, teacher practice, school space, school-wide issues, and even a whole school.

Descriptive review of written work is a foundational descriptive process that we used at City-As-School that illuminates these underlying beliefs and values. We chose to begin our work with descriptive inquiry with reviews of written work because this relatively straightforward process lent itself to our school setting, in which writing development is central for us as a Consortium school. A review of a piece of written work begins with multiple rounds of description. The first descriptive round is a line-by-line restating of the work or a specific passage. Participants in the review take turns putting each line in their own words. After the restating round, participants once again approach the piece line by line, this time identifying interesting or important words or phrases and notable aspects of sentence construction or grammar in their designated lines. The third descriptive round shifts to looking at patterns in the piece as a whole; this might include important words or phrases across the piece, significant aspects of syntax or organization, or repetition or patterns. A fourth and final descriptive round might involve connecting a focus passage to the piece as a whole. After this, the review shifts to more interpretive rounds. The first involves articulating what the work reveals about the author and his or her beliefs, interests, preferences, and values. The second and often final interpretive round involves suggesting ways of further supporting the learning and growth of the author, based on the knowledge generated through the review. The review closes with participants reflecting on the degree to which they were respectful to the author and to each other.

As this example indicates, much of each review is dedicated to close description, and interpretation or judgment is integrated at the very end and

builds on the close description. The “slow, even painstaking process” of describing allows “divergent perceptions” (Carini 2010, 84) to surface and, ultimately, moves participants closer to understanding the meaning intended by the author. Describing closely before interpreting creates an expanded picture of the work and the author that attends to “strengths and capacities” and that “breaks through the stereotypes and jargon” that might “slate children for failure” (Carini and Espinosa 2010, 34).

Underlying all descriptive processes is a belief in the capacity of the person and a commitment to attending to individuals, whether children or practitioners, as fully as possible before layering on interpretations. Patricia Carini (2000), whose writings are foundational among those who use descriptive inquiry, articulates this as follows: “I call your attention to ideas key at Prospect and for me . . . The importance of the child’s or any person’s uniqueness, complexity, and integrity. The role of description in representing these. The attentiveness to the manner in which, for any person, dynamic polarities, seemingly contradictory, enact that person’s expressiveness and complexity. The assumption of human capacity, widely distributed, as the taproot value nurturing all these ideas” (4). Looking closely at the person and his or her work ensures that interpretations are grounded in knowledge of the person. In this way, practitioners of descriptive inquiry uncover and build upon each individual’s strengths.

Descriptive Inquiry in Progressive Schools

Descriptive inquiry can help school communities to sustain and strengthen progressive practices and deepen democracy. Indeed, most schools that use descriptive inquiry identify with the progressive tradition. Progressive schools in New York City that have a deep and longstanding commitment to descriptive processes include the Earth School and the Neighborhood School, two public elementary schools modeled on CPE1, which also used descriptive inquiry for many years. Like City-As-School, these three schools were founded as part of the progressive movement in education in New York City in the 1970s and 1980s. As Meier (2002) notes in *The Power of Their Ideas*, schools like CPE1 are “progressive” in that they believe that children “are by nature generators of ideas” (33) who should be “inventors of their own theories, critics of other people’s ideas, analyzers of evidence, and makers of their own personal marks on this most complex world” (3–4). Such schools are “organized” to “keep this nascent power alive, extend it, and thus make a difference in what we grow up to be” (3). As public schools, they seek to connect to a diverse population of children, not just a small privi-

leged minority with “their own genius” rather than alienating them from it and, in this way, loosen “the constraints that poverty and racism impose on the lives of children” (3).

Descriptive inquiry is one way that these three progressive public elementary schools have worked over time to sustain and refine progressive educational practices with the goal of supporting the growth of children. Descriptive inquiry, as a school-wide practice, has helped these school communities remain “accountable” to children and to “the values that underlie their practices and structures” (Traugh 2000, 182) in an educational climate that increasingly frames accountability in terms of standardized test scores. Cecelia, who is one of the authors of this article, has supported all three schools in doing so.

For example, the Neighborhood School devoted a year to using descriptive processes to examine the topic of heterogeneity, which had surfaced as an issue “because of a division between the early childhood teachers and the teachers of the older children” (Traugh 2000, 184). Specifically, the teachers of upper grades (fifth and sixth) had “ability-grouped for math,” and the “male grade 5–6 teachers had formed a basketball team by selecting the best players rather than including all who wanted to play” (184). Heterogeneity is one of the core values of the school, and the second issue, in particular, “had incensed the lower grade teachers” (184). Over the course of the school year, Cecelia supported the staff in exploring the concept of heterogeneity as it lived in their school. This included a descriptive review of the math grouping in the upper grades presented by the two teachers of those grades and facilitated by Cecelia. The review helped the two teachers to see that they had created “an elite group” of “higher-performing students,” and it helped the rest of the staff to see that “‘the decision to group was not made casually,’” which gave them “‘more confidence about what is going on in the fifth and sixth grade’” (Traugh 2000, 188).

In another example, teachers at CPE1 worked with Cecelia to use descriptive inquiry to show the value of “project time,” a defining practice of the school that had come into question when the longtime director was replaced by a new director from outside of the school. Project time is an “open-ended” form of child-directed learning that does not translate readily into external measures of success such as standardized test scores, which are central metrics by which elementary school principals and teachers are evaluated in New York City. The review of project time showed the utility of project time for all children in learning and working independently and highlighted the very intentional practices and structures that guide project time. The review helped to sustain project time at CPE1 despite external pressures toward

“teacher-directed instruction that in turn directs children to learn a set body of information and skills measured by mandated tests” (Traugh 2005, 59). It also “gave voice” to teachers’ “local knowledge’ from their inside perspective” (69) and allowed both longstanding members of the school community and newcomers to participate equitably and to build knowledge together.

As these two examples show, descriptive inquiry can help progressive public schools sustain and refine defining practices and deepen democracy. With the support of an experienced practitioner, the staff at both the Neighborhood School and CPE1 were able to use descriptive inquiry to work together to examine important school issues and to make decisions about them. Staff members were able to empathize and see from each other’s perspectives, collectively look at school practices through the lens of shared values and local standards, and make decisions based on knowledge of children and in light of the larger vision of their school communities. The staff were also able to show the value of defining progressive practices in the context of an “ongoing ‘project of legibility’” and related “press to standardize and regulate” (Traugh 2005, 70) on the part of educational bureaucracies. Over time, descriptive inquiry has helped to sustain progressive practices and deepen democracy within these two schools.

Describing the Work: Deepening Shared Decision Making through Descriptive Inquiry

An Overview of the Work in 2016–2017 (Four Phases)

Implementing descriptive processes was our major new piece of work as a school in 2016–17. The first phase of this work (cycle 1) lasted from September through early November and involved teaching facilitators and faculty members three basic descriptive processes: reflection on a word, recollection, and review of written work. A reflection on a word involves participants sharing associations with a particular word to understand it more deeply, and recollection involves sharing personal stories about a particular topic, again with the goal of understanding the topic more deeply. A defining moment during this first phase was a two-day retreat for our facilitators led by Cecelia, during which she guided us through each of these processes so that we could experience them.

The second phase of the work (cycle 2) was student-focused study groups, which met four times from November through early December. Because the facilitators and faculty had repeatedly expressed interest in supporting students holistically as opposed to purely academically, Cecelia suggested that

we form student-focused study groups that would meet multiple times and look at various pieces of work from a single student. We did not yet have the skills for a review of a child, so Cecelia advised that we continue to look at written work. Alan and Rachel agreed and brought this plan to the facilitators, who then agreed to it. This phase allowed us to practice the process for reviewing written work, but investment among faculty in the study groups varied. We attribute this to two factors. First, faculty members did not choose the student or their groups; the groups had been created to maximize the likelihood that members knew the student and to ensure that the student had attended school consistently enough to have generated work that could be examined. Second, we were still learning how to participate in descriptive processes, which constitute a discipline and require practice.

The third phase of the work involved reforming the study groups so that they focused on questions of practice that emerged from our cycle 2 inquiry. This phase lasted from mid-March through June. January, February, and early March were devoted to reflection and planning among the facilitators. During this planning time, the facilitators formulated questions of practice based on notes from the student-focused study groups and a closing jigsaw activity that brought together members of each of the different study groups from cycle 2. Once the facilitators had solidified the questions of practice, faculty members were able to choose which question of practice they would explore in a study group for the remainder of the school year (cycles 3 and 4). Facilitators also chose which study groups they would lead and who their cofacilitators would be. This phase of the work was marked by increased investment on the part of faculty, which the facilitators noted in our planning sessions with Cecelia. One person remarked, “The energy has shifted,” and others agreed (Seher, meeting notes, April 24, 2017). We attribute this shift to two factors: (a) faculty members were able to choose their groups, and (b) all of us had become more experienced and comfortable participating in descriptive processes.

The fourth and final phase involved closing out our inquiry work for the year in a way that would lay the foundation for the following year. To this end, Alan and Rachel worked with the facilitators to plan and lead a day-long faculty retreat in late June. Cecelia supported us in planning the inquiry portion of the day and joined the retreat as a participant. The inquiry portion included three components. First, the practice-focused study groups met to reflect on their learning over their five meetings from March through June. After this, we shifted to a jigsaw activity with heterogeneous groups that each included one member from each of the practice-focused study groups so that we could all hear what each group had learned. To close, rep-

representatives of each of the jigsaw groups reported important themes, ideas, and questions to the whole faculty in a large circle. Rachel took notes and said that we would use the notes to plan our inquiry work for the following year. Faculty members had the opportunity to build on what was said or to add ideas that were missing. A key characteristic of descriptive inquiry, and inquiry in general, is that each phase builds on the knowledge created and questions generated in the previous round. This harkens back to Dewey's (1939) idea that "the process of experience is more important than any special result attained, so that special results achieved are of ultimate value only as they are used to enrich and order the ongoing process" (3).

Deepening Shared Decision Making

The benefits of descriptive processes for shared decision making began to surface in earnest during a period of reflection and planning among the facilitators at the end of cycle 2, about five months into our inquiry work (between the second and third phases of the work). This planning period lasted from early January through the middle of March. The weeks following cycle 2 are a busy time at City-As-School, filled with portfolio presentations, the English Regents exam, January graduation, and February break. The break from our regular class and meeting schedule allowed the facilitators time and space to plan. We were able to step back, look closely at our earlier work, and identify next steps. This planning period lasted from early January through the middle of March and was marked by three key facilitators meetings guided by Cecelia, one on January 9, one on January 30, and one on March 1. It culminated in the introduction of the new practice-focused study groups to the faculty during our faculty meeting on March 17.

After the final student-focused study group meeting on January 6, Cecelia met with the facilitators. The goal of this first meeting (January 9) was for us to develop a plan for closing the student-focused study groups and laying the foundation for our inquiry work in cycles 3 and 4, the spring semester. The student-focused study groups had met four times over the course of cycle 2, once in November, twice in December, and once in January. Each study group had focused on a particular student, and group members took turns bringing work from their focus students. The facilitators led the study groups in a review of written work each time and took notes. Cecelia, Alan, and Rachel talked on the phone (January 6) to plan this first of three facilitators meetings. The three of us planned all three of the midyear facilitators meetings together.

With Cecelia on speakerphone and Alan and Rachel in our conference room, the three of us quickly agreed on a plan. Cecelia suggested that we ask the facilitators to examine the notes from their four study group sessions and use them to think about new understandings that they had come to about the focus students. After that, we would transition to generating ideas for closing the study groups with the whole faculty. The broader focusing question was, “What are we going to do with the knowledge we created through our study groups?” Cecelia did not say so directly, but Alan and Rachel inferred that she intended for the activities and their sequencing to help ensure that our next steps were firmly grounded in knowledge and questions created by the study groups through examination of the work of their students. Cecelia encouraged Rachel to emphasize that the reflective activity was “low stakes” when Rachel emailed the facilitators with the meeting agenda (Seher, email to facilitators, January 6, 2017).

We met from 3:30 to 5:00 p.m. on a school day (January 9), and most of the meeting was devoted to sharing what we had learned about our focus students and the new understandings and questions developed by our groups. Cecelia facilitated so that Alan and Rachel could participate. After having time to prepare, we went around and shared in a circle, and Cecelia summarized central themes, important ideas, and generative questions.

We devoted the last half hour to the question of how to close the study groups with the faculty. Cecelia led this as an open discussion. She noted that the process we had just used seemed to work well. Alan and Rachel both agreed and noted that it was similar to a “jigsaw,” a pedagogical activity familiar to most City-As-School teachers in which individuals who have read different texts or researched different topics come together to share what they have learned. Several others affirmed the jigsaw proposal by nodding or verbalizing agreement. The jigsaw groups would include one member from each original study group and meet once “to share what we’ve learned and generate ideas for our cycle 3 focus, based on what we learned” (Seher, meeting notes, January 9, 2017). Everyone in the room agreed to this framing and approach by nodding or verbalizing agreement; in this way, we came to consensus on the plan.

We then quickly moved to additional questions that the facilitators had for Cecelia. One person raised a question about process, noting that her study group had struggled with the structured nature of the process for reviewing written work. The facilitator asked when “it was OK” to change the process and specifically wanted to know when we could “skip” the restating round, which involves participants paraphrasing the student’s writing in their own words line by line. Others echoed this question. Cecelia responded

briefly because time was short, noting that the restating round could be uncomfortable; she shared that she often found it awkward and wanted to leave it out. However, she added, the restating round was often essential to better understanding what the author was trying to say. She herself only omitted the restating round if she believed that it would interfere with participants' abilities to understand the meaning intended by the child. She reminded us that the purpose of describing was to "get closer" to the person and what they were trying to say without layering on our own judgments and interpretations (Seher, meeting notes, January 9, 2017). In this moment, Cecelia not only explained the rationale for taking a descriptive approach but also reinforced an important parameter of our shared decision making. Alan and Rachel had decided that we, as a school, would use descriptive processes, and Cecelia was there to help us do that. Not using descriptive processes or changing them so that they were no longer descriptive was not on the table.

The facilitators met one more time (January 25) without Cecelia to look at the agenda for the jigsaw and make final revisions. Rachel had taken notes on the ideas generated in the meeting with Cecelia and had drafted an agenda and emailed it to the facilitators along with possible dates for the jigsaw, shortly after the meeting. We settled on the January 27 faculty meeting for the jigsaw. Alan and Rachel worked together to create the groups so that they included at least one member from each original study group and individuals in various roles in the school; we also attempted to balance people who seemed to have taken to descriptive processes and those who had not.

In our January 25 facilitators meeting, a few people suggested slight revisions to the framing for the jigsaw discussion, which included adding the final questions, "What ideas were most important from our discussion today? What lingering questions do you have?" One person added the idea of handing out index cards at the end of the jigsaw so that our colleagues had the opportunity to offer additional thoughts, and others asked Alan and Rachel to add talking points at the top of the agenda that they could reference in framing the activity. Alan and Rachel agreed to this and then checked to make sure that every facilitator agreed to the revised agenda before ending the meeting. Rachel reminded everyone to print copies of their study group notes for their group members in advance so that they could reference them during the jigsaw. Rachel made the suggested revisions to the agenda shortly after the meeting and shared it with the facilitators and also with Cecelia electronically for a final review (Seher, meeting notes, January 27, 2017). Cecelia reminded Rachel to emphasize that the facilitators should take "good notes" during the jigsaw, as we needed them to plan.

After the faculty jigsaw, the facilitators met a second time with Cecelia, this time with notes from the jigsaw in hand. This second meeting was scheduled for 2:00 to 3:30 on January 30, which was a citywide professional development day. Our entire school had spent the morning at teacher-led workshops with other Consortium schools, and the facilitators agreed to meet that afternoon. Cecelia, Alan, and Rachel met at 1:30 p.m. that day to plan the meeting.

Cecelia again led the meeting, which started with a go-around, during which each of the facilitators shared key understandings, questions, and ideas from their jigsaw groups. Cecelia then briefly pulled threads and invited others to add. Big ideas included the following:

- Authenticity is very important to us as a school. This theme came up across the groups.
- Tension exists between the authentic talents, strengths, and interests of the individual student and the external standards that we want to help them meet (e.g., PBATs, English language arts Regents).
- A desire for the practical relevance of descriptive inquiry to be tangible and clear also came up across the groups.
- As facilitators, we want this process to be authentic for our colleagues (we want to use the process so that we all discover real meaning in it). We saw a parallel between the desire for authenticity for staff and for students.

Cecelia added that we seemed to be saying that “work is authentic when students discover meaning in it” and suggested that the tension between authenticity and external standards was “not necessarily resolvable” but that “we can explore it and make choices” (Seher, meeting notes, January 30, 2017).

Cecelia then transitioned the group to an open discussion on ways to focus on our inquiry work for cycles 3 and 4. Almost every facilitator participated at least once in the discussion, and several were able to identify concrete topics that had emerged in their jigsaw or study groups that they believed warranted exploration in cycles 3 and 4. One person suggested focusing on promoting authenticity in essay writing, another suggested concentrating on art and creative work as an entry point to other forms of learning, a third suggested focusing on students for whom connecting with school is difficult, and Rachel shared that some members of her jigsaw group had expressed a desire to focus solely on specific students with individualized education programs (IEPs; Seher, meeting notes, January 30, 2017).

Cecelia then offered overarching questions: “How and when do students discover real meaning in what they are learning?” “How do we help them to do this [already]?” “How can we help them to do this more?” She noted that each of the topics mentioned connected to that larger question and our theme of meaningful work. One group could explore how to help students find meaning in essay writing, and another could focus on artistic and creative work as the entry point for meaningful learning. Cecelia added that we could also form a group focused on a specific student, whether a student with an IEP or a student struggling to connect to school, and then suggested that we also could look at science work and internship projects for additional examples. In doing so, Cecelia modeled for us how we could think about and approach our descriptive work (Seher, meeting notes, January 30, 2017).

Members of the facilitators group agreed to this framing readily, saying yes and nodding, and Rachel offered to type up the ideas generated and share them back with the group. Rachel asked everyone to look at their notes for additional questions and to think about which they would like to facilitate. With time running out, Cecelia suggested that we meet again to finalize the plan that had begun to crystallize and to discuss questions of process; once again, facilitators had expressed concern about the willingness and ability of some colleagues to work within a structured process and wondered how much flexibility they had.

A related question about process had arisen earlier in the meeting and had served as a moment in which the boundaries of shared decision making were articulated and reinforced. One facilitator (SGil) had suggested using an “open spaces” protocol, which involves free and unfettered brainstorming of topics that are “of passionate concern” (National School Reform Faculty, n.d.), so that faculty members could generate topics and questions for the study groups in cycles 3 and 4. A second person (TP) had initially agreed with this idea. Rachel had then interjected that what we were doing in this facilitators meeting was eliciting the questions from the jigsaw groups and synthesizing them so that our work in cycles 3 and 4 would build on what we learned from our students’ work in cycle 2. Cecelia had affirmed this, and Alan had agreed. Through our response, the three of us had reinforced that we were using a descriptive approach. Alan and Rachel had decided to use descriptive processes in the school, and Cecelia’s role was to support that work; this was a leadership decision and not one we would make through a consensus process. We were now asking the facilitators to decide how we would use descriptive processes. Our response also highlighted the emergent nature of inquiry. In inquiry, each phase builds on the previous phase in a

deliberate way, which stands in contrast to an open spaces protocol marked by spontaneous and free-form brainstorming. This exchange once again defined the parameters for shared decision making. Members of the group seemed to accept this stance because they had quickly returned to discussing topics and questions that had surfaced in their jigsaw groups (Seher, meeting notes, January 30, 2017).

We scheduled the third facilitators meeting with Cecelia in this period for March 1. Alan, Cecelia, and Rachel met over February break to plan for it. Based on the next steps from the previous (January 30) facilitators meeting with Cecelia, the three of us decided to devote the first half of the March 1 meeting to reviewing, revising, and finalizing the plan for launching the new study groups and the second half to questions of process. To explore questions of process, Cecelia suggested a reflection on the word process and then creation of space for people to ask her questions and raise facilitation challenges (Seher, emails, February 27 to March 1, 2017).

Alan and Rachel had already worked together to draft a professional development calendar for cycles 3 and 4 that listed the focus of each Friday morning faculty meeting and identified the study group sessions. Most of the topics on the days not scheduled for study groups had been chosen by the facilitators, who were part of the professional development committee in a separate meeting. On the draft of the calendar, one faculty meeting (March 17) was devoted to introducing the plan for the study groups for cycles 3 and 4. Our idea was that faculty would meet in small groups led by the facilitators to review the plan, examine the study group questions, and decide which they wanted to explore. The facilitators would explain that they had identified the new questions of practice based on the notes from the jigsaw groups (Seher, emails, February 27 to March 1, 2017).

Cecelia opened the March 1 meeting, our third with her during this period, with the reflection on the word process. Alan and Rachel then introduced the draft of the plan for cycles 3 and 4 and reminded everyone that it had emerged from our previous meeting and the jigsaw groups. We explained that our hope was that we could work together to refine the plan for cycles 3 and 4 so that our colleagues would find as much meaning in it as possible. We added, at Cecelia's suggestion, that a guiding principle for forming the study groups was to bring different perspectives together; we wanted to form groups with people from multiple roles and disciplines. The facilitators quickly agreed to these principles and the general plan for cycles 3 and 4. Suggestions included adding a few new questions of practice and refining some of the existing questions. Most of us left the meeting having chosen the question of practice that would be our focus and having chosen our

cofacilitators. Two individuals could not think of questions at that time and said that they would add them later. Rachel agreed to work with specific individuals to finalize the study group questions after the meeting. The facilitators agreed to meet without Cecelia the following week to look at the plan for launching the new study groups one more time and to make final revisions (Seher, meeting notes, March 1, 2016).

The last part of the March 1 meeting was devoted to questions of process raised by facilitators. Many of the questions again focused on the structured and disciplined nature of descriptive inquiry. Cecelia again reminded the group that the multiple descriptive rounds and the practice of taking turns speaking were intended to draw out the ideas, thinking, and interests of the student. She emphasized that taking turns ensured equity of participation and that bringing together different perspectives—of classroom teachers, internship coordinators, counselors—helped create a fuller picture (Seher, meeting notes, March 1, 2016).

What Cecelia added this time was that we were at the point of learning to use our judgment in planning the reviews. She said that we were prepared for this because we had devoted cycle 2 to learning to facilitate reviews of written work. This statement elicited smiles and expressions of excitement, as if we had graduated to a new level as facilitators. One person immediately raised a question about a guidance counselor in her group who wanted to focus on a student whom she believed other adults had given up on. Cecelia shared some initial ideas for the kind of process that the facilitator and counselor might use, and Rachel agreed to meet with the facilitator and counselor to plan the review. Cecelia had said to Rachel before the meeting that we would need to support the facilitators in starting to use their judgment (Seher, meeting notes, March 1, 2016).

The facilitators did meet one more time without Cecelia to revise the plan for launching the study groups on March 17. We had finalized the study group questions before the meeting and did not discuss them further. Alan and Rachel had divided the questions into three categories and represented them as follows (Seher, meeting notes, March 8, 2017).

Types of Work

- How do/can we help students discover meaning in formal writing (e.g., essays, research papers)?
- How do/can we help students discover meaning in portfolio pieces (PBATs) and presentations?

- How do/can we use ongoing reflective writing to lay the foundation for deeper and more meaningful learning and work?
- How do/can we help students discover meaning in artistic and creative work in and of itself? How do/can creative forms of work serve as the foundation for learning in other academic subjects? (Note whether you are more interested in the first or second question.)

Types of Pedagogical Processes

- How do/can we help students engage in meaningful inquiry and find meaning in what they learn through inquiry?
- How do/can we help students derive meaning from content that they are learning? Where do we see evidence of this in their work?
- How do/can we help students find meaning in work that lasts more than one cycle (e.g., two-cycle classes and internships)?

Types of Students

- What do we already do that helps students with IEPs find meaning in their work? How can we build on this? (Pieces of work from various students with IEPs brought by the teachers in the group.)
- What do we already do that helps school-resistant teenagers find meaning in their work? How can we build on this? (Pieces of work from various students whom we perceive as school resistant brought by teachers in the group.)
- For a specific student for whom finding meaning in schoolwork has been difficult: When do we see this student finding meaning in his/her work? What are the qualities of this work? How can we build on this?

Since we had finalized the study group questions before the meeting, we could focus on planning for the faculty meeting. Alan and Rachel had drafted an agenda ahead of time that started with a recollection on meaningful work from cycles 1 and 2, followed by time to explore the inquiry plan and study group questions for cycles 3 and 4. The idea, we explained to the facilitators, was that the recollection would prime all of us for choosing study group questions that connected to our experience in some way.

The facilitators gave multiple suggestions for revising the faculty meeting agenda, and we made changes to it directly as we spoke. The first set of suggestions focused on the recollection; they included changes to the wording and emphasizing that the purpose was “not only to reconnect with the idea of meaningful work but to prime ourselves for choosing inquiry questions” (Seher, meeting notes, March 8, 2017). The second set of revisions focused on changes to the documents that we would hand out to the faculty. The third and final set of revisions focused on key talking points for Alan and Rachel in framing for the inquiry work for cycles 3 and 4 for the faculty and on the flow of the March 17 session. These suggestions included emphasizing that “teachers have the answers” and reminding everyone that “the facilitators met and looked at the notes from the jigsaw groups” and that “the questions for C3/4 [cycles 3 and 4] emerged from our discussions of those notes.” The facilitators also asked Alan and Rachel to remind our colleagues that “meaningful work” was our instructional focus for the year and to reiterate that “work is authentic when students discover meaning in it.” Toward the end of the meeting, Alan and Rachel restated the sequence of activities that the facilitators had suggested one more time and offered to create a preference sheet to give faculty for choosing their study groups; we would share it with the facilitators to review and revise electronically. We then asked if anyone had any final suggestions or concerns. No one did, and several people indicated that they were happy with the plan and the adjustments to it (Seher, meeting notes, March 8, 2017).

Publicly Advocating for Descriptive Inquiry

On March 17, we (Alan and Rachel) opened the faculty meeting by framing our inquiry work for cycles 3 and 4 using the talking points that we had developed with the facilitators. The facilitators then identified themselves, and we asked our colleagues to form small groups with one or two facilitators in each. The facilitators led their groups through the recollections, introduced the questions of practice and the preference sheet, answered questions that arose, and then asked their group members to indicate their top two or three questions of practice on the preference sheet. The meeting seemed to have gone smoothly, with all of the groups going through the agenda and every faculty member filling out a preference form.

After the meeting, however, some facilitators mentioned that some of our colleagues had struggled to connect with the questions of practice, and a few had expressed that the questions of practice did not truly reflect “teacher

voice.” In response, these same facilitators worked with us (Alan and Rachel) over the weekend to write a letter to the whole faculty explaining the value of inquiry and why we were using this approach. The entire facilitators group then looked at the letter in our meeting on March 22, which was the Wednesday before the first study group session. The larger group suggested final revisions to the letter, and everyone agreed to distribute it to the faculty along with the list of study groups and members. The facilitators also helped match groups for faculty members who had initially struggled to connect with questions.

The letter represented an important crystallization of the facilitators’ commitment to working collaboratively using descriptive processes. In the letter, we collectively said to our colleagues, “We will continue to look closely at our students and their work using descriptive inquiry, since this will ultimately help us to better understand and support them. Our academic inquiry goals this year include looking at student work using descriptive review and progressing to a descriptive review of a child. Our focus for this year is helping students create meaningful work and find meaning in academic work and learning” (letter to staff, March 24, 2017).

Rachel first sent the letter to the faculty along with the final study groups for cycles 3 and 4, but the facilitators ultimately explained and, in some cases, defended it to our colleagues. All of the facilitators reviewed the letter during the first meeting of the practice-focused study groups on March 24, and several also discussed it with colleagues informally throughout the day. One facilitator shared that when a colleague critiqued the letter for coming from the school leadership and, therefore, dampening teacher voice (in this person’s view), she was able to say that the letter came not just from the school leadership but that she had helped to write the letter and that she also believed in our use of descriptive processes and the plan for the study groups (verbal communication, March 24, 2017).

Lessons and Interpretations: What Did This Mean, and What Did We Learn?

Bringing descriptive inquiry to City-As-School allowed us to deepen shared decision making and, in doing so, to more fully actualize our commitment to “democracy as a way of life” (Dewey 1939, 2). Descriptive inquiry created the conditions for members of the facilitators group to make decisions in a more inclusive and constructive way than before. Specifically, we made decisions together about how we would use descriptive inquiry in our

school. Members of the facilitators group decided the form the study groups would take, the topics and content of the study groups, and the specific way that each group would use descriptive processes. The facilitators were also involved in generating, refining, and finalizing plans for whole faculty meetings that were part of our inquiry work at every step of the way. We did not move forward if concerns were expressed, and we ensured that all views were included. Cecelia guided us in this and led facilitators meetings using a descriptive approach.

Through this work, members of the facilitators group further developed the habits Dewey named as necessary for democratic participation. We engaged in an ongoing and deliberate planning process that involved listening actively, speaking respectfully, and disagreeing in ways that were constructive. Through this, the teacher leaders and school leadership came to see each other more fully and connected “human to human.” We started to become “we,” not “us and them,” by planning collaboratively using descriptive processes.

Working together in this way also increased investment. The facilitators had the opportunity to shape the inquiry work in ways that mattered, and their opinions and ideas were reflected in final plans. We (Alan and Rachel) also felt seen and included because the facilitators agreed to use descriptive processes, which was what mattered most to us. The inquiry work became all of ours because we made decisions collaboratively. Our collaboration in writing and sending the letter is emblematic of this. When we drafted, revised, and agreed to send the letter to the faculty, we advocated for our collective work. Collaboratively writing the letter was a moment of heightened investment and a moment in which all of us had the experience of participating in democratic social life together in a full and real sense.

The approach to shared decision making that crystallized during this period was not pure direct democracy and involved role differentiation, which represents a divergence from Dewey’s democratic ideal. We (Alan and Rachel) did make leadership decisions. Most notably, we decided to use descriptive processes and to work with Cecelia to do so. We consistently reinforced this leadership decision in facilitators meetings and with the whole staff. Facilitators agreed to use descriptive processes and gave input as to how we would do so but did not decide whether we would attempt to fit descriptive inquiry into our work as a school. In addition, the faculty as a whole did not have a direct say in whether we would use descriptive inquiry. This is not to say that faculty voice was not elicited or included. The facilitators took into account ideas from faculty members in creating the study group options and deciding how to form the study groups. Finally, Cecelia

took a specific role as our guide because she had the knowledge and experience to do so.

Although our approach may not have met Dewey's (1939) standard of providing open and unlimited access for all community members to "the contacts, the exchanges, the communications, the interactions by which experience is steadied while it is also enlarged and enriched" (4), role differentiation seemed necessary at the time for three interrelated reasons. First, and most notably, City-As-School is a public school located in a larger school system that is organized as a hierarchical bureaucracy and that places certain demands on principals; one of these is to have a coherent professional development plan in place at the start of each school year. Second, as a public school, we also work under significant time and resource constraints. We did not have years to go through a consensus process to choose a school-wide inquiry approach, although this might have been closer to the Deweyan ideal. Third, City-As-School has a relatively large staff of about 50 people; involving every staff member in making every important decision directly is nearly impossible with a group of that size in a school setting.

Moreover, role differentiation might represent a valuable divergence from Dewey's ideal. A responsibility of school leaders is to foster the creation and enactment of a vision for learning in a school that is reflective of the school community's core values. We (Alan and Rachel) take this responsibility seriously. We explored descriptive inquiry before introducing it to our colleagues and did so because we believed it would help us as a staff to actualize core values such as our commitment to democracy and shared decision making. Teacher leaders have many responsibilities that instructional leaders do not, including designing and facilitating a full load of classes. They may not have the time or background knowledge necessary to take the lead on the creation and enactment of a vision for learning in a school. However, their participation is vital for bringing a faculty perspective and including a broader array of community members in democratic processes. Finally, our work greatly benefited from the support of an experienced practitioner who supported both the school leadership and the facilitators group. Role differentiation was vital to descriptive inquiry taking shape and allowed us to deepen shared decision making.

Making a leadership decision to use descriptive inquiry, which is an egalitarian process, rather than insisting on a particular policy, program, or outcome is, in fact, aligned with a commitment to "democracy as a way of life" (Dewey 1939, 2). Descriptive inquiry allowed us to maintain a vision of process for the whole while allowing for flexibility, variation, and teacher choice in the specific focus and form of our work. Descriptive inquiry helped us to

navigate the tension between unilateral decision making by the school leadership, at one extreme, and teacher-driven decision making that did not build toward a vision for the whole, at the other extreme.

Democracy is complicated, especially in public schools working with limited resources and within hierarchical bureaucracies. Although our work with descriptive inquiry at City-As-School may not have immediately achieved the Deweyan ideal for democratic education, we took significant strides toward shared decision making. Our work shows that descriptive inquiry can help progressive public school communities create the conditions for shared decision making and, in doing so, come closer to more fully actualizing “democracy as a way of life” (Dewey 1939, 2).

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