

REIMAGINING THROUGH
ENCOUNTERS:
DESCRIPTIVE INQUIRY
AND DEMOCRACY IN
SCHOOLS

CARA FURMAN

University of Maine at Farmington

CECELIA TRAUGH

Bank Street College of Education



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John Dewey offers the following syllogism: a healthy person or culture must be able to grow.¹ Growth occurs when we confront something new or different and adapt to incorporate this new element into our schema. Democracies therefore both depend upon this capacity for growth, and in creating spaces for the constant confrontation with others, they also enable the development of this capacity.

The alternative can be dangerous to everyone involved. For example, using the metaphor of a stone, Dewey argues that when an object hits a rock and can't adapt, either the moving object or the stone it hits may shatter or become squashed. Within this framework, the public schools offer a rich and precious ecosystem uniquely suited to protect democracy as one of the rare spaces in which various publics come together to interact and potentially develop the capacity for growth, à la Dewey.

¹ Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York: Free Press, 1916.

When considering current risks and assaults on democracy, we are haunted by the following exposé of discipline in public schools:

The spaces have gentle names: The reflection room. The cool-down room. The calming room. The quiet room.

But shut inside them, in public schools across the state, children as young as 5 wail for their parents, scream in anger and beg to be let out.

The students, most of them with disabilities, scratch the windows or tear at the padded walls. They throw their bodies against locked doors. They wet their pants. Some children spend hours inside these rooms, missing class time. Through it all, adults stay outside the door, writing down what happens. . . .

Children were sent to isolation after refusing to do classwork, for swearing, for spilling milk, for

throwing Legos. School employees use isolated timeout for convenience, out of frustration or as punishment, sometimes referring to it as “serving time.”²

In our experiences as teachers and teacher educators, we regularly see and hear about children silenced, removed, and isolated in schools.³ The punishments in the above description are horrifying in their cruelty and disregard of the children’s humanity. Yet silencing and shunning occurs daily in schools in far more banal forms.

It is near ubiquitous that in public schools across the United States children seen as different, those who cannot conform, and those who resist are all penalized with exclusion, isolation, and physical regulation.⁴ Such silencing and ostracization threatens democracy because 1) it is unequivocally inhumane and 2) this silencing and shunning of alternative voices and ways of being means that

² Richards, Jennifer Smith, Jodi S. Cohen, and Lakeidra Chavis. “The Quiet Room.” *Chicago Tribune*, 2019.

³ Shalaby, Carla. *Troublemakers: Lessons in Freedom from Young Children at School*. New York: The New Press, 2017.

⁴ *Ibid.*

only some voices can influence the common.⁵ Democracy is therefore at risk.

Responding to this threat, we first offer an alternative: two teaching moments that live up to Dewey's commitment to schools as spaces in which different perspectives are shared and people from different backgrounds and with different aptitudes and needs can work together to create a common community. Second, recognizing the challenge of making space for difference in schools within a culture that encourages silencing and isolating,⁶ we argue that a process for studying teachers and teaching, Descriptive Inquiry, helps teachers combat this punitive culture and cultivate an inclusive and democratic ethos.

⁵ Shalaby, *Troublemakers*; Paley, Vivian Gussin. *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990.

⁶ Leafgren, Sheri. *Reuben's Fall: A Rhizomatic Analysis of Disobedience in Kindergarten* (International Institute for Qualitative Methodology Series). Left Coast Press, Inc., 2009.

Vision of Democracy

As a support teacher in an elementary school,⁷ Furman came across a child lying in the hallway outside the office. When asked to go to class, he refused. Faced with this resistance and the strong desire to get the child back to his classroom, Furman ran through a number of facts she knew about the child - he often preferred pressing against the floor or walls and he tended to anger easily when given a directive. She ran through strategies she'd used in the past with other students: humor, coming up with authentic choices. Putting together what she had noticed about the child and what she'd tried before as a teacher, she offered a challenge, "I bet you can't roll all the way to class." Intrigued, he proceeded to demonstrate that he could. Furman's teaching repertoire has been expanded as was her understanding of what can be done in the hallway.

Traugh describes teaching middle school and being frequently frustrated with a child who was constantly

⁷ This and the following example are drawn from our co-authored book, *Descriptive Inquiry in Teacher Practice: Cultivating Practical Wisdom to Create Democratic Schools*. 2021. Teachers College Press.

moving during her lessons. Initially, she sought to silence his body with a regular, “sit down.” At that time, her class was doing weekly studies of a tree. On one of those visits, she noticed the child “spent his time running around with his arms extended straight out, bending, and swaying as he ran.”⁸ She figured out that his movement was a full-bodied expression of the tree.⁹ Humbled by this observation, she began to see his movement in the classroom as embodied sense making, commenting, “through his imagining, I begin to reimagine him” and, in doing so, allow for more movement for him and his peers. Not only did his imagining change her teaching but also, she writes, “I have never seen leaves falling to the ground in the same way.”¹⁰

In the opening exposé, the teachers silence and shun. This is harmful to the child, the community, and even the teacher.¹¹ In contrast, in these two examples, not only was the child welcomed and protected but also the community was able to thrive and grow because of the child.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁹ Dewey, *EW 5*: 195-6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Shalaby, *Troublemakers*.

What distinguishes us? While tempting to speak to the inherent quality of the two authors, our superior patience, or “magic” with children, we argue that something else is at play. We both regularly practiced Descriptive Inquiry and it was this practice engaged in regularly -- that ultimately gave us a way to welcome each child in their difference. Though a thorough introduction to Descriptive Inquiry is beyond our scope, we highlight a few key features that we recommend.

Centered around careful observation and description, teachers are encouraged to simply sit with children and take descriptive notes. When a teacher presents an inquiry, a chair then helps them ensure language is descriptive, as opposed to evaluative. A teacher might replace “the child is defiant” with, “when asked to go to class the child says no” or “the child is unfocused with” “the child is always moving during class both within his seat and frequently getting up.”

All observations are centered around “attending with care.”¹² In other words, we are paying attention in the

¹² Carini, Patricia F. “A Letter to Parents and Teachers on Some Ways of Looking at and Reflecting on Children.” In *From Another Angle: Children’s Strengths and School Standards: The Prospect*

service of looking after the child's own interests. To support this, Furman always suggests writing as if someone who loves the child or the child themselves might read it.

The presenter then brings an authentic question to the work that builds on observations. Were Furman to present the student she encountered in the hallway, she might ask - "what helps him feel safe and at ease at school and how might I draw on this in moments where he seems frightened or agitated?" In Descriptive Inquiry, people participate in rounds, often describing back what they hear and responding to questions. Benefiting from hearing different perspectives, when Furman presented on the child who wouldn't move in the hallway, one group member had noted that some children find hierarchy interesting and important. This observation informed her choosing a competitive option (can you roll?) that didn't emphasize her authority.

Descriptive Inquiry is neither a panacea nor the only entry point to welcoming all children. However, in

Center's Descriptive Review of the Child, edited by Margaret Himley and Patricia F. Carini, 56–64. *Practitioner Inquiry*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2000, 56.

engaging in Descriptive Inquiry regularly and over time, one's approach to others is permanently altered. Encountering the child in the hallway, Furman drew on what she knew about him and prior insights from others about him to deescalate the situation. Watching her student in a different context, Traugh reimaged both him and her understanding of trees. A democracy demands the capacity to be with others, and in this engagement, produces mutual growth. This capacity must be practiced and enacted in our schools, and it is in danger whenever children are shunned and silenced.