
Democracy & Education

Practices to Live with, Invitations for Change.

A Book Review of *Descriptive Inquiry in Teacher Practice:*

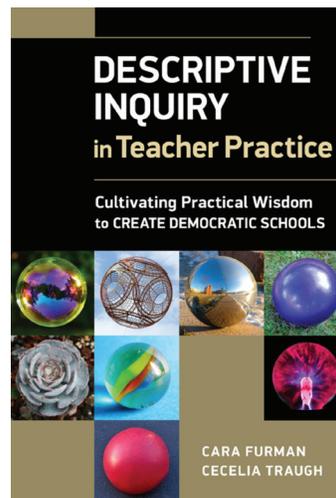
Cultivating Practical Wisdom in Create Democratic Schools

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A Book for Every School

AS I WRITE this review, we are facing the unimaginable in our schools, struggling to make sense of the implications of the pandemic on teaching, children, and communities. School buildings are cautiously reopening, children are emerging from virtual spaces into physical classrooms, and teachers are asked to reinvent their practice to meet needs that we cannot yet envision. Cara E. Furman and Cecelia E. Traugh's book *Descriptive Inquiry in Teacher Practice: Cultivating Practical Wisdom in Create Democratic Schools* (2021) speaks directly to the needs of educators and educational communities during these challenging times. It is a unique voice in this time of crisis, offering a nuanced guide into developing and sustaining democratic school practices that genuinely emerge from schools' identities.

As an educator, I find myself particularly drawn to this text because of its orientation inward, toward the teacher, the child, the school community. Far from the frequently offered "solutions" to "fix" our teaching and schools, Furman and Traugh (2021) frame dynamic practices of reflection intended to know and develop ourselves, our "practical wisdom," more deeply and sustainably. The text orients teachers and school communities inward, toward themselves, rather than away in the direction of some unattainable otherness that feels distant from individual schools and teachers. In their words, "... a school is an expression of its makers" (p. 87), and in this book, teachers, children, and administrators are



indeed empowered as makers of democratic communities. In a time when teachers and schools are frequently encouraged to look outside of themselves, to a new curriculum to purchase, a new professional development to attend, a new consultant to hire, through descriptive inquiry, this book bravely frames teachers and school communities as complete and capable, offering habits of mind to meet the ever-evolving needs of dynamic, democratic school communities. As we step into the

yet-to-be-imagined needs of post-pandemic schools, Furman and Traugh ask us, "What does it mean to make the classroom a home for every child? The school a home for every child and teacher?" (p. 4) And in these pages, they invite us to begin writing our own answers.

A Space of Conversation

I begin with thoughts on the shape of this book because of the powerful effects of its conversational nature. As I read, I found

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myself amid a cacophony of voices, much like the reality of teaching experiences; Furman and Traugh (2021) describe, “a multi-layered text to acknowledge the multi-voiced nature of teacher development and success” (p. 8). The choices that the authors have made in the voice and shape of their writing invite each individual educator to experience this book as particularly connected to their personal experiences. It is a text alive with conversations, as the authors engage in lively conversation with each other, as well as the other educators who have shared their perspectives. The use of extended anecdotes to give body to each theoretical concept invites the reader into the center of their intentions, feeling that moment and learning through it with the authors. Furman and Traugh engage in layered conversations between theory and practice, a delicate dance that deeply engages the theory as it is activated in the lives of educators. In addition, the authors engage in a calling in of the reader at the beginning of each chapter, asking questions and engaging the reader’s experiences to invite understandings connected to individual practice. This tool has the effect of inviting the reader’s experience and voice into the conversation, encouraging us to envision our own teaching narratives, drawing the lenses of the book into our personal experience.

An Invitation into the Theory

Part 1 of the text invites the reader into the theoretical framing of the book through a dynamic interplay of theory and practice, each enlivening and deepening the other through their conversation in the text. The concept of teaching for democracy is commonly (if sometimes vaguely) invoked in educational culture, but this portion of the book elucidates this concept, clearly identifying their intentions as “a commitment to human dignity and the methods that help to realize that commitment” (Furman & Traugh, 2021, p. 10). This framing of teaching for democracy around the idea of human dignity offers the educator a flexible yet concrete concept to be carried into any situation. Therein is the power of this text as a whole; the authors engage with abstract notions and immediately connect them to the everyday realities of children and teachers. As an educator, I can see and feel myself in each chapter, each question, each theory given body through experience.

The Aristotelian (1999) notion of “practical wisdom” is put forth as a foundational concept to be used to navigate the layers of “teacher knowing” (p. 17) that are enacted by those teaching for democracy. The rich concept of practical wisdom allows the reader to delve into many layers of knowledge that intersect in effective democratic teaching, as well as inviting the reader to consider the reflective practices that enable the wondering and questioning of these democratic teachers. This perspective both validates the concept of “teacher knowing” and also makes visible the layers of reflective practice that allow teachers to engage as researchers in this moment, engaging their experience in service of democratic teaching.

Part 1 is particularly effective in its laying out of the fundamental needs for creating sustainable democratic practices, centering “true friendship, the polis, . . . and the care of the self” (Furman & Traugh, 2021, p. 25) as the foundations for generating

democratic practice. In Chapter 3, we finally reach the tool by which this democratic work may be enacted: descriptive inquiry. The authors make visible the structure of teaching for democracy, offering the lively pragmatics of this work. Furman and Traugh (2021) delve into issues of control and power in teaching, offering a self-reflective practice that interrogates these traditional constructs of teacher power to offer space for a new conversation. They reposition the role of teacher, shifting value away from control to a structured process of questioning, wondering, and destabilizing what we think we know.

Bringing Theory to Life

Part 2 explores the practices of descriptive inquiry through the lenses and experiences of several different educational settings. The authors make clear that, to develop democratic schools, we must be willing to change and to be changed by the students. Schools must be agile and responsive. Part 2 engages with the questions: How is that sustainable? How do we create practices of responsiveness that are viable in classrooms?

Using the framework of descriptive inquiry and its many layers as a reflective practice for schools, Part 2 illuminates the ways that these structured ways of considering teaching, children, academic work, etc., provides the organizational structure that untethers curricula from prescriptive models, opening classrooms and curricula up to the shifting identities and needs of classroom and school communities. In these pages, we hear the voices of educators in many school settings, making visible the process of descriptive inquiry through rich, engaging descriptions of their school’s processes. In the words of one educator, “. . . we wanted to move toward a collaborative culture with deep roots in the faculty, not one that was imposed by the formal school leadership” (Furman & Traugh, 2021, p. 63). Throughout the examples given, the educators demonstrate the power of this inquiry process to position curriculum and practice as dynamic and cocreated with children, teachers, administrators, and school communities.

Democratizing in/with/amid Systems

Through the lenses of the schools, teachers, and administrators we met in prior chapters, Part 3 invites the reader into the transformative power of descriptive inquiry in challenging educators to see our classrooms, our schools, our students, our communities, differently. In a profession and institutions that can rely upon already established systems when solving problems, this portion of the book demonstrates the role of descriptive inquiry in re-envisioning and reimagining. Rather than outsourcing to other “experts,” packaged curricula, or external professional development, descriptive inquiry is employed in school settings to turn the gaze inward, creating systems of dynamic relationships and supports that genuinely meet the needs of schools, and respond to the specific questions they are posing as communities. What is so striking about these anecdotes is the way that the inquiry processes not only respond to the precise needs of the school but create dynamic spaces for deeper questions and collaborative responses to challenges. It is clear that what is created is not only a response to an issue but nuanced ways of engaging around education that

evolve with the individual stories of the schools and their many educators.

Democracy and Leadership

In the final portion of the book, Furman and Traugh (2021) make visible the reality that democratic communities are based upon structure, leadership, and culture. These organizational components are sometimes misunderstood or ignored when considering “progressive” or democratic schools; progressive schools are too often perceived as unstructured, which does a disservice to the complex, ever-evolving process of developing and sustaining a school culture of democracy.

Part 4 invites the reader into the complex roles of school leaders in creating and sustaining school cultures of democracy. Again, our authors engage in dynamic conversation with other school leaders, demonstrating the ways that the tools of descriptive inquiry meet the wide-ranging needs and questions of different school environments. We step into the lively conversations created by Furman and Traugh (2021) and their collaborators, exploring the ways that the structured practice of descriptive inquiry moves from formal spaces, and into the informal culture of school interaction and values. A critical element of these school cultures is the idea that “knowing children well became an expectation in all the principals’ schools” (p. 167), but I take this notion one step further. As a result of this practice of descriptive inquiry, these school cultures appear to be places where *all* members, children, teachers, and administrators are known well and experience a safe

space for being known. This concept emerges throughout this portion of the book in making space for genuine self-care, reflection, and positioning of the teacher as learner through the formal and informal culture of descriptive inquiry, “Coming out of hiding. Breaking down barriers. These actions point to a kind of vulnerability different from that which is at the root of the need to hide or create barriers. It is a vulnerability that opens the teacher to a new kind of learning” (p. 175).

Final Thoughts

In education, we need books that orient us inward. We need tools that support us in making our strengths visible, our communities connected, and our questions collaborative. Furman and Traugh (2021) have created a dynamic text that succeeds both in being broadly encompassing as well as constructively specific in building democratic communities from within schools. I can imagine this book being read and interpreted in thousands of different ways, meeting the needs, stories, and experiences of schools in every part of the country. Not only do they invite us to rethink and re-envision but they tell us *how* we might do so in a way so highly individualized that any story, any school, is invited to the table.

References

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- Furman, C. E., & Traugh, C. E. (2021). *Descriptive inquiry in teacher practice: Cultivating practical wisdom to create democratic schools*. Teachers College Press.