It was late May, and we were bringing to a close our school-year cycle of study groups and seminars with New York City educators in public schools and after-school programs. As facilitators and staff developers from the Center for Educational Options, we asked the participating educators in each group to reflect on what they had learned and what had supported them.

Their comments were laden with thoughts about what was critical to their learning as educators—observing children at work; inquiring into issues that were essential to them; dialogue, time, and reflection along...
the way. When we began working with these educators, we knew from our own experiences as teachers and staff developers that these were the essential elements that contribute to our ability to critically reflect on what we do and what we believe. We also knew that there is not a step-by-step recipe for getting people to reflect. Rather, it is an active process of providing support and space, scaffolding adult learners, and creating a collaborative environment in which thoughts and ideas can be tested and explored. We wanted to look more closely at what we do to provide professional development that values educators, supports inquiry, and leads to reflection.

Risko, Vukelich, and Roskos (2002) state in their review of research on preservice teachers and reflective practice that “the professional literature is thick on describing researchers’ goals and intentions but thin on providing guidance for teaching students how to reflect” (p. 135). We know it is important to have opportunities to reflect for professional growth, but what goes into creating dynamic structures for reflection? In the process of looking at how the educators we worked with grew and changed, we decided to describe and attempt to make visible just how the professional development framework we created provoked reflection for both in-school and out-of-school educators. This article offers an examination of how our use of descriptive analysis of children’s work supported professional inquiry and growth for educators and for the children they serve. 

**Naming and Claiming the Work of Educators**

Listening carefully to the educators with whom we worked raised another critical aspect of adult professional development—that of valuing one’s own growth and knowledge. All these educators were experienced in what they do. Yet as we explored children’s literacy and learning over the school-year cycle, there were profound moments in which it seemed as if the children’s growth, as shown in the evidence presented, had happened by magic. The participants often said, “It is the kids!” as if a wand had been waved magically, sending the children on their way to becoming more confident and competent readers and writers.

If educators are to be able to value, stand up for, and continue to develop their professional knowledge, then they must be able to articulate what it is they do, why they do it, and how it works for their students. In the current movement toward scripted instruction and packaged training, it is important that there be space for professional inquiry and reflection. Engaging in description and analysis of children’s work allowed us to investigate what the educators were doing to support literacy development and learning and how their practice supported the children. It was not magic at all. As we helped participants to become more explicit about their practice and to analyze the impact of their decisions, the educators began to see themselves as having a powerful impact on both the children and on other educators with whom they work.

**Creating Forums and Structures for Reflection**

For twelve years, the Center for Educational Options (CEO), a small nonprofit organization, has provided professional development services in literacy to educators in a variety of New York City public schools and after-school programs. Our services usually take the form of study groups or seminars that meet one or two times a month for 1.5 to 2 hours. For school groups, this means carving out a double preparation period or using professional development periods. For after-school groups coming together across programs, it means schedule-
study individual children, develop instructional next steps, follow up on the results, and reflect on the implications for teaching and learning.

We have always used the careful study of children’s work to guide our professional development with pre-Kindergarten to 12th-grade educators, whether the setting is in a school or informal community environment. We look at what children can do, and do know. We encourage educators to utilize descriptive language, which in turn provides fertile ground for understanding children’s patterns of knowing and being able to develop instructional implications or next steps (Barrs, Ellis, Hester & Thomas, 1988; Carini, 1986).

The professional development structure we have developed has the description and analysis of children’s work at its center. This work rests on the adaptation of two well-tested methods. We began with “kidwatching,” a term coined by Yetta Goodman (1985) that refers to the close observation and descriptive recording of what children do and say, and how they interact with materials and others. Kidwatching captures what children do, say, and think as they are doing, saying, and thinking it (O’Keeffe, 1996), and allows the participants to enter the child’s world and to listen and observe from a different vantage point. By bending down to the child’s level, participants uncover valuable understandings about how children learn.

We also drew on the Descriptive Review process of the Prospect Center (Carini & Himley, 2000). The Descriptive Review process is a carefully structured way to engage a group of participants in a nonjudgmental, rich description of a child or a child’s work that leads to new insights to support growth. Since we work within the time limitations of schools and after-school programs, we have modified the process so that we can utilize it in a 60- to 120-minute block that includes a welcome, closing remarks, and any short business items. While maintaining the focus on children and description as a way to gain insights, we have abbreviated and consolidated some of the aspects of Descriptive Review as originated by Carini and her colleagues at the Prospect Center. In preparation for the group meetings, where observations and samples of student work are collectively reflected upon, we help educators identify which child or children to “kidwatch,” and which “guiding question” will focus their work.

A typical study group or seminar meeting in which we engage in this modified Descriptive Review might proceed something like this:

I. Welcome—This might include a reflection on the previous session or the reading of a children’s book to set the tone. Participants are invited to contribute their own reflections and connections.

II. Modified Descriptive Review

A. Presentation of background/contextual information about the child and work sample(s): The presenting educator describes the child’s demeanor, attitudes about literacy and learning, particular interests and passions, and struggles. The presenter also includes a description of the circumstances of the work samples: what were the directions or prompts, what were the expectations, how and with whom did the child work?

B. Articulation of guiding question: The presenting educator states a question about the child, the work, or her/his role to focus the group’s analysis and feedback. This question is usually developed in advance with the group facilitator.

C. Study of the observations and work sample(s): The presenting educator shares, through reading to and showing the group, her/his observations and the child’s work samples.

D. First go-around for group members to share reflections on what they have heard and seen: Participants note abilities and approaches, particular strategies, and competencies as shown by the evidence; the emphasis is on description and specificity, always turning back to the evidence. Each member is given a turn to describe; the facilitator records and reads back the descriptions and reflections at the close of this round.

E. Second go-around for group members to ask questions and make suggestions for next steps based on evidence presented: Each member is given a turn to ask questions and offer suggestions; the facilitator records and reads back the suggestions at the close of this round.

III. Closing remarks: This might include reflections on how the Descriptive Review insights relate to the presenting educator’s action research theme.

IV. Business items: This includes schedule and preparations for the next Descriptive Review session as well as a statement of intention to revisit suggestions from previous sessions in order to follow up with a particular child and educator.
We developed the Descriptive Review Process form (a completed sample is shown in Figure 1) to support group members in gathering the descriptions, insights, and suggestions of their peers for further reflection and practical use. Action research methodology serves as an over-arching framework for our professional development (Shagoury Hubbard & Miller Power, 1993). We wanted the educators to develop and ask their own questions about literacy and learning, gather evidence that would help them address those questions, and pause along the way to reflect on what they were learning. As the considerable body of research and documentation shows, action research provides educators with opportunities to problem-solve, to expand their thinking and repertoire of possibilities, and to come to change on their own terms (Carr & Kemmis, 1983; Strickland, 1988). We saw action research as a way to validate educators’ questions and to work toward addressing those questions in a cyclical process that develops individual and collective knowledge. This cycle is described by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988):


This action research format offered us a way to integrate the study and analysis of children’s work with educators’ inquiries into literacy learning.

**How Structures for Collaborative Reflection Enable New Understandings and Transform Practice**

Through the modified Descriptive Review process, we were able to come to new and in-depth understandings about the children, the educators, and their action research questions. For example, Gabrielle presented her observations and evidence of four children in her after-school program, focusing the group on her larger inquiry into what motivates children to learn. She explained that she was drawn to observe the four children in the first place because they were so engaged in planting beans and sprouting potatoes. On the particular day that she observed them, they were not distracted by other popular offerings, electing to stay with the plants for almost two hours, investigating, questioning, drawing, and discussing.

The seminar group reflected on what they saw through her descriptions—children taking initiative, showing leadership skills, making choices, and developing their own theories. The group also probed more deeply into what the staff and Gabrielle, as director, were doing to encourage this kind of inquiry by children. They wondered aloud about how relationships play into motivation and engagement, how choice of staff and use of their talents and skills supported children’s learning, and how we make room for children’s voices and choices (see Figure 1). These responses prompted Gabrielle to reexamine and think through some of her ideas about what she and the program’s educators were doing to foster learning.

As in Gabrielle’s case, sometimes the questions or ideas were big, and therefore difficult to attach to a particular next step. These big questions required us as a group to revisit the data, consider new observations, and ponder how Gabrielle might begin to engage her staff through conversations about children and their work. This reflection emerged slowly over time.

Other times the modified Descriptive Review process led to insights and actions that had immediate application. Jill and Jaime, two teachers in a fourth-grade inclusion classroom, presented Sherrell (pseudonym) and her writing, a first draft of a story entitled “Bad News.” They wanted to think more about how to prompt Sherrell to expand and develop her writing, to incorporate more description and sophistication. In introducing Sherrell, her teachers created a picture of a girl who likes and chooses to write and read, has a wide range of interests, and, though she is willing to try the activities offered in class, is not one to take initiative to further develop her work. The group members reflected on Sherrell’s sense of story. She sequentially told the story of an incident on Christmas day in which she expected her uncle to pick her up and take her to his house. When he called to say that he could not, her feelings changed from happy to disappointed. They noted that she explored some of her own emotions, beginning with happy and ending with upset, and that she is skilled at using language to make shifts and emphasize certain things.

Using the evidence presented and description generated, the facilitator and other teachers in the group...
worked with Jill and Jaime to create a plan in which Sherrell’s writing would serve as a model for the whole class, encouraging students to engage more actively in the revision process (see Figure 2).

That very afternoon, Jill and Jaime pulled their fourth-grade class together to discuss revision. Using Sherrell’s work as a model, they had her read the piece while the other students listened. Jill and Jaime then modeled asking (and recording) questions of the author that could be used as prompts for adding description and richness. Sherrell came alive, thinking out loud about her responses to the class’s questions:

- What about Christmas, specifically, made you so happy?
- How did your facial expressions change when you became upset?
- Where are you? At home? At someone else’s house?
- Did anyone else notice how upset you were?
- How did your uncle get sick?

The children went to work in pairs, questioning each other and then using the questions posed (and written on sticky notes) to revise their selected piece of writing over the next several days. What began as an attempt to develop Sherrell’s writing became an immediate plan for Sherrell and a whole-class lesson on the writing and revision processes.

**Getting Messy and Allowing the Process to Evolve**

Modified Descriptive Review sessions can be a catalyst for change in educators’ thinking and practice. But it is not a linear or particularly neat process; the path is often circuitous and the learning not entirely clear until we have been immersed in it for some time.

In a dual language public school in upper Manhattan, we convened a
A group of educators to explore how to better support the literacy development of dual language learners. The question emerged from participants’ concern about their students, and we guided them to observe children who could illuminate this overarching issue. But it was not easy to step out of the intensity of the classroom to describe and analyze evidence of children’s work, so we began each session by sharing a children’s book that was new to the group and that tapped into some of the questions of connecting to the primarily Dominican/Latino community served by the school. For example, we read *The Secret Footprints* by Julia Alvarez (2000), and *Family Pictures/Cuadros de familia* by Carmen Lomas Garza (1990). The educators discussed the personal and professional connections they made to the books, and these discussions became touchstones for our developing perspectives of children’s literacy learning. Following the reading and discussion of the children’s book, we invited the educators, in turn, to present data they had collected on a particular child’s literacy in both Spanish and English for a modified Descriptive Review. Together, participants went systematically through stages of describing what they saw in the children’s work in both languages, analyzing what the evidence led them to know about the child, and suggesting instructional implications that emerged from their new understandings. As they were reviewing growth in two languages, we led them to develop instructional implications for each language.

In reflecting on the experience of describing and analyzing children’s literacy, we observed how the educators were able to move beyond their own comfort zones and consider new ways of supporting their students. The use of literature as a springboard for discussion helped to create a safe space for exploration and growth. The modified Descriptive Review process provided a structured framework that allowed for deep analysis and meaningful reflection on the children’s work. It also underscored the importance of language in connecting to diverse communities and perspectives.
work during a year of monthly sessions at her school, Lucia, a dual language teacher in the group, said:

I always try to create a relationship between the children and me. I welcome them, open myself, create a community. I model for them: I write with them. I tell them how I use my writing so that people can know what has happened to me through my writing. I wanted to go beyond "what I did this weekend" so I invited the children to write with: "Tell me something I don't know about you." I shared something about me and my own children. We talked first. One child talked to me about her cousin's birthday. When she went to write, she wrote ¾ of a page, which doesn't usually happen until February, at least in Kindergarten. This was an enormous change from the writing she had been doing before I made the invitation. She had so much to say after I modeled and we talked as a community. Now I just open the conversation and everyone has so much to say and then they know what they are writing about. The details in their writings are amazing!

Arriving at that point where Lucia "made the invitation" to her students required Lucia and her colleagues to engage in a couple of months of kidwatching and several rounds of close analysis through the modified Descriptive Review. Sometimes the proposed next steps did not have the intended effect or were deemed to need further thought and development. Sometimes what seemed clear to the participant when the modified Descriptive Review process concluded for that session did not seem so clear the next day or the next week. As facilitators, we needed to follow up with conversations, new questions, and observations. JoAnne’s thinking evolved over the course of our seven months of professional development. She is an educator in an after-school program for children in transitional housing. After several weeks of initial discussion and observation, JoAnne came to an action research question about how she could get children engaged in the experience of “story.” She believed this to be a valuable experience for literacy development, but also knew that many of the children in her program perceived any activities that resembled school as threatening. JoAnne observed the children she was working with, watching what grabbed their attention, what activities and stories they returned to, and how they interacted with each other. She noticed that even simple plots, if unfamiliar, were hard for the children to recall.

Because of the cyclic nature of this process of describing and analyzing children’s work, new insights and questions emerged over time.

but they were quick to pick up on the details of dramatic violence and songs embedded in stories.

In conversation with a facilitator, JoAnne’s prior experience as a storyteller bubbled up. In fact, she was already using her storytelling abilities to tell parts of the stories instead of reading them when the text did not hold the children’s interest. Why not use her storytelling talents to engage the children further? Over the course of the next three months, she introduced and guided a storytelling project that included telling a core of stories such as “Rabbit’s Snow Dance,” “The Gruenwolf,” “The Three Bears,” and “The Story of Little Babaji.” She engaged the children in telling their own stories and retelling the ones she told to them, and then acting out the stories. The project eventually culminated in a Storytelling Festival with successful performances by five groups of children.

During those same months, her participation in modified Descriptive Review processes in our action research seminar for after-school providers helped her to weather the uncertainties and bumps in the road. At times, the children’s immediate responses to particular stories or activities were not enthusiastic or engaged. At one point, she felt that the children weren’t connecting to the stories because they weren’t able to retell and didn’t want to work on a book-making activity she had developed for them. But through a modified Descriptive Review process, the facilitators and the other seminar participants turned her focus to what was happening. Though the children did not always leap in the way JoAnne intended, they often circled back to her ideas and activities. A child insists on engaging in a bookmaking activity that she had dismissed two weeks previously; children share their stories with others in the program, outside of the library; children act out stories in the recreational portion of the program; children take books from the after-school library that are similar to or related to the storytelling project stories. At unexpected moments, they demonstrate new understandings of story, language, and literacy.

At the end of seven months, JoAnne wrote:

I see more clearly where I still assume too much and need to break tasks down into more manageable steps, where the children’s anxiety masquerades as disinterest and needs to be probed rather than disciplined,
where over time their interests will declare themselves if given a chance, where sometimes I must drop my specific agenda and see if it will come back on their terms. All these perceptions make me better able to keep exploring.

I had not thought of myself as particularly successful in this after-school program up to now. I have some successes, yes, but perhaps I tend to see the glass as half empty. The feedback others in the Action Research Seminar gave in response to my data suggests to me that maybe I am closer to achieving my goal than I have thought—that I need to stop inviting self-doubt and begin to take command of what I am doing. (Kraus, action research paper, unpublished, 2003)

Because of the cyclic nature of this process of describing and analyzing children’s work, new insights and questions emerged over time. This close observation and deep description of children and their work propelled participants’ thinking and moved them to see themselves and their work in different ways.

CONCLUSION

In this time of increasingly scripted programs and training, of pressure to teach to the test in schools, and to make after-school programs more closely resemble school, we strive to create spaces for pedagogical discussions that value and build on what educators know and do. As Pearson (2003) commented in an essay on what is vital about literacy education, “We desperately need teachers who can apply their craft with great flexibility. . . . We want teachers who use their deep knowledge of children’s histories, routines, and dispositions to create just the right curricular mix for each and all—and we want them to use their inquiry skills to alter those approaches when the evidence that passes before their eyes says they are not working” (p. 15). Engendering such thoughtful and flexible professionals requires professional development that is rigorously structured but not scripted or rigid. We offer these snapshots of our work with educators as windows into the process of using descriptive analysis of children’s work to promote professional inquiry and change—change in the way the educators work with children, change in children’s access to literacy strategies, and change in the way the educators think of themselves professionally.
As our research and experience has shown, we need ways to make real connections between literacy theory and literacy practice. Creating structures for reflection that draw on the methods of other experienced educators such as Carini and Goodman and that put children and their work at the core of professional development sessions is a concrete way to make such connections. For us, kid-watching laid the foundation for the modified Descriptive Review process. In the framework of action research, the modified Descriptive Review process fed both immediate actions (or next steps) and the posing and exploring of larger questions about teaching and learning. Lucia opened the door to dual language kindergartners’ writing about what is special and important to them in both Spanish and English. This contributed to the group’s exploration of bilingual and bicultural literacy development. Jill and to understand what it is we educators do and how we do it. Being able to describe the “what” and “how” of our work allows us to expand our knowledge, our strategies, and our flexibility based on what we see and how we analyze it. It develops educators’ disposition to inquiry by probing the nuances and complexities of teaching and learning.

Essential to the analysis of children’s work is a “sacred space”; educators need a regular, uninterrupted time and space set aside from the pressure, energy, and activity of classroom, school, and after-school life, and a well-designed and predictable structure to support and guide their dialogue and reflection. It also requires patience with the ebb and flow of reflection and change and the challenges presented by the ever-evolving demands on educators in and out of school. But with this reflective professional development, we can make a difference in children’s literacy growth and educators’ sense of themselves as professionals.

Having structures that encourage reflection, action, and change is especially important given the pressures and challenges currently facing educators in many settings.

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References


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