Project Overview:

Descriptive Inquiry (DI) is a method of gathering student data through observation while diminishing judgment and highlighting student strengths through a collaborative process involving teachers and family members. This was a practice developed in rural Vermont in the 1960s and since then has been adopted within progressive schools (Carini, 2001; Himley & Carini, 2000; Himley, 2011).

The goal of the proposed mixed methods study is to see if a process like descriptive inquiry can lead to academic growth and increased social-emotional support for Latinx students who are English language learners (ELLs) and/or students with disabilities. Additionally, can the collaborative community developed through the descriptive inquiry processes help teachers feel more supported thus leading to increased teacher satisfaction and teacher retention.

While descriptive inquiry is used across grade levels (early childhood to high school), for the purpose of this study the focal age group would be between pre-kindergarten and sixth grade due to the high rate of referrals for ELLs and students of color during this educational period (Rinaldi & Samson, 2008; Samson & Lesaux, 2009, Fitzgerald, 2015).

This study is an extension of a study that was done with Maplewood/South Orange teachers during AY 2019-2020 (until the pandemic-related school shut downs).

The core of this study would:

- **Establish descriptive inquiry as a pedagogical practice in a school.** This would be done in order to see if changing the ways in which teachers approach assessment, vis-à-vis student performance, results in a reduction of disability labels and disciplinary actions while increasing student achievement.

- **Provide professional development to teachers** by instilling contextual understandings of their students that extend beyond grades and performance on high stakes testing. Although high stakes testing has been shown to be a flawed measure of student achievement many educators continue to use it as a central marker of student ability and competency, perhaps this is because they lack alternatives (Fitzgerald, 2015).

- **Gather formal data of DI as an alternative assessment/MTSS process.**

- **Develop collaborative teacher communities:** Descriptive inquiry is an alternative that can provide teachers a more complete understanding of a student as well as support for teachers who are struggling to meet the needs of diverse learners. Through collaborative processes teachers can get support from their colleagues on how to best meet student needs as well as how to improve their own teaching practice.

- **Increase the visibility of struggling students.** Students who struggle are often characterized by their needs. As such, their strengths, gifts and talents can easily go unnoticed and unnourished. By giving teachers the tools they need to expand their understanding of a child, we give children an opportunity to be seen as complete human beings rather than as a summary of problems.

- **Develop parent – teacher partnerships centered on child strengths:** DI is a collaborative process that views parents as experts. Parents of color are often left out of conversations regarding their child until a problem is identified. Often when they are
introduced to the conversation it is to be informed of a problem rather than to engage in data collection, or even to contribute data. DI engages parents as members of the team allowing them to share their expertise around their child’s unique development. As such, parents add an additional dimension to the understand of who this child and how the school can best support them.

**Research Design**

**Research questions:**
1. Does the adoption of DI decrease ELL student referral to special education and/or disciplinary actions?
2. Does the adoption of DI increase teacher’s sense of community and satisfaction with their practice?

- **Methods:**
  - **Participants:** 10 teachers (a mix of Bilingual Education, ESL & Special Education)
  - **Quantitative:** Survey data from teachers
  - **Qualitative:** Interviews, observations, recollections
  - **Data gathering:** 1 year

**Timeline:**
- **September 2020 - October:** Identify participating school and participating teachers
- **November:** apply for grant funding
- **May-June 2021:** Here back from grant funder and begin next steps with school district
- **September 2021:** Identify potential focal students; develop classroom data collection systems; First teacher interview
- **October:** Start monthly meetings and observations
- **November – May 2022:** monthly meetings with teachers where they bring issues about students to descriptive inquiry group – on site.
  - On-going data collection about student performance (anecdotal and qualitative and quantitative).
- **June 2022:** Interview with teachers and administrators.
- **September 2022:** Share initial findings report with school and district administrators.

**The project grant will fund the participation of 10 teachers:**
- **Teacher support:**
  - $250-$500 participation incentive for each teacher (amazon or “donors chose” gift cards) to help fund classroom needs.
  - A copy of “From Another Angle”
  - Journals for each teacher to document experience – these will be collected at the end of the data gathering period.
- **Parental Support:**
  - $100 for parents of focal students; $50 per interview

**Required from teachers and/or district:**
- Release time of two hours for monthly meetings
- Permission to observe in the classrooms
• Willingness to be interviewed
• Support in engaging parents to participate in the study

Benefits for Local School/District
• Free PD for teachers
• Yearlong support for cohort of teachers and school administrators
• Teachers will receive stipends to be used for classroom resources
• Incorporate a strength-based parental engagement system for Latinx parents.

References