

**PROSPECT'S
DESCRIPTIVE PROCESSES**

**THE CHILD,
THE ART OF TEACHING,**

and

THE CLASSROOM and SCHOOL

Revised Edition

Edited by Margaret Himley

Revised Edition edited by
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface to the Revised Edition	4
Introduction by Margaret Himley	5
THE CHILD	9
The Child: Descriptive Review of the Child	10
[1] “The Child: Descriptive Review of the Child” by Patricia F. Carini, in <i>From Another Angle</i>	10
[2] “A Letter to Parents and Teachers on Some Ways of Looking At and Reflecting on Children” by Patricia F, Carini	13
[3] “Descriptive Review of the Child: Observing and Describing Babies and Adolescents” by Patricia F. Carini	20
[4] “Recollecting and Describing Physical Presence and Gesture,” a group process adapted from Guidelines for Prospect Fall Conference 2002 by Patricia F. Carini and Betsy Wice	25
The Child: Descriptive Review of Children’s Works	27
[5] “Collecting and Describing Children’s Works at Prospect” by Patricia F. Carini	27
[6] “Descriptive Review of Children’s Works in <i>Shared Territory</i> by Margaret Himley	30
[7] “Descriptive Review of Works: Guidelines for Describing Visual Works,” adapted from “Made By Hand,” remarks made by Patricia F. Carini at University of Vermont Workshop with Vermont Writing Project, March, 2007	37
[8] “Descriptive Review of Children’s Works: Guidelines for Describing Written Work,” adapted from Guidelines for Prospect’s Fall Conference, 2008 by Patricia F. Carini, Mary Hebron, and Betsy Wice	41
[9] ”Reflection on a Keyword: ‘World’ by Patricia F. Carini in <i>Jenny’s Story</i>	42
THE ART OF TEACHING	43
[1] “Descriptive Review of Teaching as a ‘Work’ and as an Art Form: by Patricia F. Carini	44
[2] “A Descriptive Process for Reviewing Activities in the Classroom with Implications for Knowledge-Making, Learning, and Curriculum” by Patricia F. Carini	48
[3] “Descriptive Review of Practice,” adapted by Rhoda Kanevsky and Lynne Strieb	53
[4] “Descriptive Review of an Issue,” by Patricia Carini	56
[5] “Recollecting: Purposes and Process,” by Patricia Carini	58
[6] “Format for Close Reading Documents, Texts, Etc.” by Patricia F Carini	61

THE CLASSROOM AND SCHOOL	64
[1] "Gathering Teacher Stories from the Classroom" by Patricia F. Carini	65
[2] "The Descriptive Review as a Lens to the Classroom" by Cecelia Traugh	66
[3] "Descriptive Review of a Space" by Patricia F. Carini	69
[4] "Descriptive Review of a School" by Patricia F. Carini	74
ROLES	76
[1] "Observing Documenting, Presenting" by Mary Hebron	77
[2] "Chairing" by Betsy Wice and Rhoda Kanevsky	84
[3] "Suggestions for Observers" by Patricia Carini	88

PREFACE TO THE REVISED EDITION

Prospect's Descriptive Processes has been consistently in demand since the book first became available in 2002. For this reason, it seemed imperative to continue to make it widely available even though the Prospect Archives and Center for Education and Research has closed, and the Prospect Archives have been moved to Bailey/Howe Library, Special Collections at the University of Vermont. We are, therefore, delighted to bring you this revised edition now available online for download at no cost. It is important for readers to know this edition includes new content as well as changes designed to provide consistency across processes.

Please be sure to follow Fair Use copyright practices. It is important to give complete credit whenever you use these processes.

We strongly recommend that if you are new to Prospect's disciplined Descriptive Processes, and to the phenomenological premises from which they emerged, that you read *From Another Angle: Children's Strengths and School Standards*, edited by Margaret Himley with Patricia F. Carini (Teachers College Press, 2000) and *Jenny's Story: Taking the Long View of the Child*, Carini, P.F., Himley, M., Christine, C., Espinosa, C., and Fournier, J. (Teachers College Press, 2010) before using the processes outlined below. We also highly recommend *Starting Strong: A Different Look at Children, Schools, and Standards* by Patricia F. Carini (Teachers College Press, 2001). This collection of talks provides the wider context of ideas and values foundational to the processes and relates both to current educational, social, and political issues.

Further resources for reading about the Prospect Archives and Center may be found at Resources link at the UVM website:

<http://cdi.uvm.edu/collections/getCollection.xql?pid=prospect&title=Prospect Archive of Children's Work&view=prospectResources#a>

We are confident this revised edition of Prospect's Descriptive Processes will continue to provide a valuable alternative to other, more judgmental ways of looking at children's growth and learning as well as ways of documenting curriculum, teaching practice, and schools.

Information about the Prospect Archive, including the files of nine children from the Reference Edition are available on line through the Center for Digital Initiatives, Bailey/Howe Library website:

<http://cdi.uvm.edu/collections/getCollection.xql?pid=prospect&title=Prospect>

Introduction

by Margaret Himley

Formerly, Chair, Publications and Media Committee
Prospect Board

Especially now, in this time of high stakes testing, accountability, and enforced standardization, we as educators must ensure that education starts and builds from the strengths of children and teachers and values human capacity, understood as widely distributed. The Prospect descriptive processes provide a philosophical and political basis for informing the work of teaching by:

- making visible the strengths and capacities of all children as learners and thinkers
- making valuable the knowledge of teachers and parents
- making vital the democratic values underlying public education.

Prospect, a national network of educators committed to observation and description as the grounding for teaching practice and inquiry, developed the following processes of disciplined description over many years and in many sites under the intellectual leadership of Patricia F. Carini. When the Prospect School (1965-1991) began, teachers and staff brought with them a substantial knowledge of John Dewey's philosophy as well as progressive educational and social aims more generally. As Patricia F. Carini recounts,

“From its very beginnings, the classrooms at Prospect featured plentiful choices for children, opportunities to make things from a rich array of open-ended and natural materials, ample use of the out-of-doors, and reading, writing, and math taught with individual attention to each child. . . . [W]e were committed to an examination of the school's practice through observing, recording, and describing what happened in the classrooms and for children on a daily and continuing basis. The idea was that a school and a staff could create a comprehensive plan for doing this kind of observational inquiry and that such an investigation could be school-based – that a school could itself generate knowledge of children, of curriculum, of learning and teaching. . . . In practice, this meant . . . paying close attention to how a child goes about learning or making something, and not only to assessment of what the child learned, made, or did. . . . [W]hen a teacher can see this process, *the child in motion*, the child engaged in activities meaningful to her, it is possible for the teacher to gain insights needed to adjust her or his own approaches to the child accordingly” (*From Another Angle*, pp. 8-9).

From this philosophical and methodological premise, Prospect began to develop a family of descriptive processes. The first was the Descriptive Review of the Child. A full account of this review, along with essays about the descriptive stance and the phenomenological premises from which it emerged, is available in *From Another Angle: Children's Strengths and School Standards*, edited by Margaret Himley with Patricia F. Carini (Teachers College Press, 2000), and *Jenny's Story: Taking the Long View of the Child*, Carini, P.F., Himley, M., Christine, C., Espinosa, C., and Fournier, J. (Teachers College Press, 2010). We highly recommend that those new to Prospect's disciplined description read these books before using the processes outlined below, as they provide a detailed and dramatic account of how a descriptive review is organized and accomplished – and why. We also highly recommend *Starting Strong: A Different Look at Children, Schools, and Standards* by Patricia F. Carini (Teachers College Press, 2001). This collection of talks provides the wider context of ideas and values foundational to the processes

and relates both to current educational, social, and political issues.

Here we provide the outlines of several review processes, with some context and background included. We hope that teachers, parents, and school administrators will read through these processes, recognizing the significance of how carefully and rigorously a review process is organized, ordered, and enacted, and will consider how to use them in their own school settings to inquire into their own questions. We invite them to try the processes out, reflect on how they worked in particular contexts, make modifications, and try them again. We also hope the processes encourage readers to learn more about Prospect by reading our publications. The processes are about doing and reflecting and doing again – and about trusting ordinary people to draw on the powerful but ordinary skills of observing, documenting, and describing.

The processes have been used for a variety of purposes, such as:

- to gather stories and observations about a child who seems to keep slipping through the cracks,
- to review the grade level standards and promotion policies of the school,
- to understand how a particular classroom activity such as ‘construction’ works across a spectrum of classrooms and with children of different ages,
- to learn more about a child’s particular strengths as a learner and thinker by describing her writings and drawings,
- to reflect on the word *writing* as part of an inquiry into how a writing program is working within a classroom,
- to describe the school library in terms of its physical arrangement, ambience, and social life.

We imagine the possibilities of using descriptive inquiry are endless and profound. That is, we know that the processes carry within them important premises and values. They emerge from and support a vision of education that assumes that teachers and parents have the knowledge of children necessary to make education work and that all children – indeed, all people – have the capacity to learn and to make a contribution.

The descriptive processes all begin with immersion – observing a child or space or activity, exploring the many meanings of a keyword, drawing forth from teachers’ own memories. They all have a focus or focusing question that the chair and the presenting teacher or parent or administrator work out thoughtfully ahead of time and that gives the participants a sense of how to listen and respond to the review. The processes are always collaborative. They have rules and roles necessary for making the inquiry process democratic and inclusive, and for guaranteeing respect and privacy for the individuals involved.

A review typically takes about two hours. All the processes use descriptive language: language that is particular, concrete, ordinary language that avoids the categories, labels, and assumptions of educational theory or assessment. They are organized by a series of go-rounds, in which everyone speaks and no one is interrupted by cross talk. What people say is not commented to across the circle. There are typically three roles:

Chair: She works with the presenter ahead of the review, introduces the review, makes sure the review follows the procedures, offers restatements at key moments, and calls for an evaluation of the process at the end.

Presenter: This is a teacher or parent or administrator who works with the chair to find a focus for the review, gather materials and observations, and organize the actual presentation.

Note-taker: For each review, someone is asked to take notes during the review, to transcribe them later for others, to gather the materials, and to add them to the archive.

Each process strives for richness, complexity, balance, texture, and multiple perspectives. It is critically important, especially now, to see each child in his or her fullness as a person and not as a ‘star’ or ‘trouble-maker’ or ‘hyperactive kid.’ The language used in the review is descriptive and concrete, not jargon-y or judgmental. We assume, too, that the knowledge that emerges from the review is always situated and partial, always open, never finished or finalized. The purpose of learning to describe is to develop a descriptive stance, one that keeps educational possibility open and in motion.

The descriptive processes have been reworked many times over the years – and will continue to be reworked. What remains constant is valuing detail and complexity in the descriptive review, taking the time to plan and to do the review carefully and fully, avoiding judgmental language, always including multiple perspectives, and respecting the child and family and teacher.

The processes can also be learned under the guidance of teachers with years of experience using them in their daily practice, by reading the Prospect books identified above and others in the bibliography at the end of *From Another Angle* (Teachers College Press, 2000), (pp. 213-218), and, if there is opportunity, by attending an inquiry group that uses these processes. Experiencing the processes contributes significantly to understanding them and using them with confidence.

“Descriptive inquiry is a powerful resource. While children should be at the heart of schooling, it is ironic, even tragic, that they often become invisible as individual learners, as people with particular strengths and interests, within the pressures, constraints, mandates, institutional discourses, and daily demands of schooling. It’s hard to see children in all their complexity. It’s hard to connect with them. It’s hard to value their difference. All too often they are reduced to test scores or categories, like ‘stars’ and ‘handfuls’ (or even ‘double handfuls’). Furthermore, as Margaret Howes (an educator and member of the Prospect board) once said, sometimes teachers find themselves frozen in relation to a child or a classroom situation, stuck in a way of thinking that isn’t productive or perhaps even really clear to themselves. Doing a descriptive review with other teachers and parents *unfreezes* them, allowing them to see the child or situation from many points of view, to have new ideas and images to work with, to flesh out new meanings, to imagine possibilities – and so to get the teaching going again. Rich in phenomenological detail and depth, this kind of working knowledge moves teachers and teaching along.” (*From Another Angle*, p. 127)

The processes always insist on according others – all others – the status of person, with all the complexity, capability, range of emotions and desires and possibilities that implies. Patricia F. Carini challenges us all to take this valuing of the person seriously:

“What I want to say . . . is that it takes vigilance — hard, recursive work — and it takes educating ourselves in the largest sense of the word to keep alive this awareness of human complexity. It takes an active attunement to the fullness of passion in each

person, to the driving desires of each person to make and to do, and to the strong, basic need of each of us – and all – to be valued and valuable” (*From Another Angle*, p. 131).

It is with this political and philosophical hope that we introduce a range of descriptive processes – not as a casual technique, but as a method of inquiry that enacts a deep commitment to human capacity and to the possibilities of sustained collaborative inquiry as central to the vision, aims, and practices of education.

Note: The following two processes are reprinted by permission of the publisher: “The Descriptive Review of the Child” in *From Another Angle: Children’s Strengths and School Standard*, Himley, M. with Carini, P.F. NY: Teachers College Press. © 2000 by Teachers College, Columbia University. All rights reserved, pp. 12-15, 56-64.

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THE CHILD

THE CHILD: DESCRIPTIVE REVIEW OF THE CHILD

[1] “The Descriptive Review of the Child” by Patricia F. Carini in *From Another Angle* (pp. 12-15)

Reflection on a key word (this is optional) (See p. 42)
 The chair’s framing remarks and the focus for the review
 The presenting teacher’s map of the classroom and description of the schedule
 The presenting teacher’s portrayal of the child, according to:
 physical presence and gesture
 disposition and temperament
 connections with others (both children and adults)
 strong interests and preferences
 modes of thinking and learning
 The chair gathers main threads from the portrayal (also called ‘integrative restatement’)
 Additions to the presenting teacher’s portrayal: observations by other staff
 History of any significant illness, unusual absences, and so forth (very brief)
 Chair restates the focus question(s) and invites questions and comments from the participants in the review
 Questions, comments, dialogue
 Chair gathers main themes from the discussion and restates the focus question
 Responses and recommendations form the review group
 Evaluation of process, with particular attention to respect for the child, the family, and the teacher
 Plans and calendar for any upcoming descriptive reviews

It’s a Tuesday after school. We are meeting in the staff room, which doubles as an adult library and study room for the post-B.A. adult students enrolled in Prospect’s Teacher Education Program. While the staff and teacher education students are gathering, the chair for the review and the teacher who is primarily responsible for describing the child who is at the center of this particular descriptive review session are attending to last-minute details: laying out some of the child’s drawings, writings, and constructions, and perhaps making an adjustment or addition to the focusing question for the review. Each of these roles, chair and presenting teacher, rotate from week to week among the staff, as does the role of note-taker, the staff member who keeps a record of main themes from the description of the child and the recommendations that are made as the descriptive review draws to a close.

As these last minute arrangements between chair and presenting teacher suggest, the descriptive review that is about to happen already has a history. Sometime in the preceding week, the chair and presenting teacher met to plan the review. With the chair acting as a listening ear, this was the opportunity for the presenting teacher to work through how she might focus the descriptive review for her colleagues and how she would organize her own portrayal of the child. For the portrayal, she would rely heavily on her daily and weekly records.

If you were to sit in on that meeting, one of the things you would learn is that the focus for the review doesn’t have to reflect some major problem or crisis. The presenting teacher might, for example, mostly want the help of other staff in getting to know better a child who often seems not to be visible in the class. “How is it,” she might ask, “that this child seems always to slip by me? How can I get a clearer picture of where she is making her presence felt in the group?” Or the teacher might be wondering if some concern she feels is actually well founded. For example: “This is a child who is altogether competent academically, but it isn’t at all clear to me what ideas, questions, materials fire her imagination or arouse any strong enthusiasm. I want to think that through. Am I missing something? Am I making too much of what I perceive to be a lack of any strong personal interest? Is it enough educationally that the child complies with whatever I

suggest and participates in whole-class activities?”

Now, on the day of the descriptive review, the chair makes sure the chairs are arranged in a circle so everyone participating will be visible to one another and visually invited to take an active role. Today, including the teacher education students, there will be 10 of us. Figuratively, the child who is the occasion for all of us to gather is situated at the center of that circle and at the center of our collective attention.

The chair convenes the session. The presenting teacher is ready with her portrayal of the child in the form of notes she made in advance of the session. On a low table, she has positioned close to hand the child's artworks, writings, and projects she means to call attention to as she talks. Everyone in this review group, not only the note-taker, is equipped with paper and writing implements. We will use these to keep track of questions and observations that occur to us while the presenting teacher is describing the child – a portrayal which will take upward of 30 minutes and is uninterrupted.

Since the presenting teacher and chair have decided on a reflection on a word to preface the review, the chair announces what that will be (see p.42). Setting aside *visible/invisible* and *presence*, the presenting teacher has settled on *slip/slips* because it seems closer to how she experiences the child she is going to describe. The chair invites everyone in the review circle to write down words, images, and phrases that these words – *slip* or *slips* – call to mind. After we have had time to reflect on the word individually, each of us reads aloud what we have written. The word surprises us, as words tend to do, with its variety and richness of meanings. Among these: slide, silk; silent or quiet; a whisper on the wind; slippage; slippery slope; an undergarment; sideways; to slip between; slight or small as in “slip of a girl.” The chair pulls together clusters of these meanings, reminding us that we will *not apply* the reflection to the child; rather it will serve as surround and context for the picture of her that the presenting teacher will paint.

With the reflection completed, the chair talks about the values that guide the Descriptive Review of the Child process. The chair gives this especially careful attention since the teacher education students attending this review are relatively new to the process. What she emphasizes in her remarks are confidentiality and respect: that everything said during a review is kept strictly within the circle of participants; that each of us is to strive to speak descriptively and provisionally, to honor the child's strengths and capacities, and to avoid speculations about the family and its circumstances. The chair suggests that a good rule of thumb is not to speak of the family or the child in language we would not use if they were present.

What does it mean to speak descriptively and provisionally? It means to set aside heavily judgmental language and diagnostic or other categorizing labels such as “hyperactive” or “learning disabled” or “developmentally delayed.” The chair explains that no child is *always* moving or invisible or pestering or whatever – no matter how much it seems that way to the harried or concerned parent or teacher. She suggests that phrases like “it seems to me” or “from my perspective” leave room for the child to be other than what any of us might think. The chair stresses that what is most important is to ground language used to describe a child in examples and illustrations so that the language is well-rooted in observation.

As the chair comes to the end of these framing comments, she calls attention to the procedure of the descriptive review, which has been circulated in advance to those who are familiar with the process [see above]. She introduces the child we are going to review, giving the child's name

and age, the names of family members and/or other caregivers, the length of time she has attended Prospect, and the multiage group in which she is currently enrolled.

The chair reads the focusing question the presenting teacher and she have put together to frame the review. With that preamble, the descriptive review is underway.

[2] “A Letter to Parents and Teachers on Some Ways of Looking at and Reflecting on Children” by Patricia F. Carini (in *From Another Angle*, pp. 56-64)

Dear Parents and Teachers,

I have chosen a letter as the way to talk with you about looking at children and reflecting on what you have noticed for the reason that letters can be personal in tone and rather informal. And that fits with what I want to say about observing – an attitude or way of looking that I prefer to think of as “attending to children with care.” Parents and teachers are interested in children. They are with children a lot. Through that continuous immersion, parents and teachers possess thick layers of working knowledge about children. Parents and teachers care *for* children and they also care *about* children. Parents and teachers share the responsibility for educating children. And yet, often teachers’ and parents’ knowledge of children is neither recognized nor valued.

This letter describes an exercise that is meant to do just that: to value and recognize your interest, caring, and knowledge and to build upon it for the benefit of children. The exercise I propose asks teachers and parents, or others with children close to them, to form a habit of regularly re-viewing them – that is, calling them to mind; picturing them in particular settings or locations; remembering them in a variety of postures and moods; listening with an inner ear to their voices. The purpose of this re-viewing is the deepened recognition of children. It is meant to give you, the important grown-ups in a child’s life, a way to recognize fully how much you already know and understand. It is meant, too, to expand those understandings and to create a context of memory, ever growing and deepening, that will inform your own responses to children as individuals.

If your experience with this exercise turns out to be something like my own, you will also find as you visualize a child in your mind’s eye – or listen to the child’s remembered voice and words -- that there are blurs and gaps in the picture. Some of these will make you wonder, reconsider, and take a closer look. In this way, for me, recollecting leads to more attentive looking and listening. It is also important, though, to keep in mind that the purpose of attending isn’t to scrutinize a child or even to ‘figure them out’ – and certainly not to change them into someone else. The purpose is simpler and more ordinary: to be more sensitively attuned to who they are and are becoming, so that, recognizing them as persons, we can better assist and support their learning.

To do this exercise, cast your inner eye on a particular child. If you want to re-view several children, perhaps all the children in your family, or a group of children in a classroom, it usually works best to do this one at a time. At least in my experience, if I try to do several at once, they blur or one child takes center stage and calls the tune for others. Then, instead of seeing each child as who that child is, I find myself comparing them according to what stood out to me about that first child who caught my attention. What does work is to develop the picture of one child, allow an interval of time, and then move on to others. The first few children will take quite a lot of concentration; as you form the habit of attending carefully, you will find yourself noticing more and remembering more. As your memory strengthens, you will grow more attuned to subtler and broader aspects of children’s expressiveness. As you notice more, and attend to what you notice more consciously, the picture of a child will form with greater ease, and your capacity to keep a number of children in mind at the same time without blending them will increase.

As you are recollecting a child, also form the habit of making notes to yourself of what you are remembering. The notes are raw material that you can go back to later to review in preparation for a parent-teacher conference or in order to present (or write) a portrayal of the child. Other

raw materials you might keep along with this folder or journal of notes are photographs, drawings or other things that child makes, or even if you wish, audio or visual tapes.

Another help in recollecting a child is to think of the child in a variety of settings and locations. Every parent knows how surroundings and time of day influence a child; so do fatigue or illness. Teachers are often aware that a child who is free and open outdoors on the playground may look less so in the confines of a classroom or even seem subdued or withdrawn. Also children (and adults) have favorite places to be and other strong preferences; for example, feelings about how quickly or slowly they want to start or end the day or an activity; how many people they want around and how much time they need to be alone; how long they can sit in one place and concentrate on the same thing and how much variety and change they can comfortably tolerate, etc.

The following paragraphs use headings of the descriptive review of the child as a sort of organizing device for recollecting. Use them as they seem helpful, but please don't feel bound by them. They are meant to prime the pump of memory, but not to be confining or predetermining.

Thinking of a child's **physical presence and gesture**, be attentive to what stands out to you immediately. Then, take note of size and build, but also of style of dress, color preferences, prize possessions, etc. Visualize how the child moves, with attention to pace, characteristic rhythm and gestures, and how they may vary. For example, you might think about how the child tends to enter the classroom or the child's pace at home first thing in the morning or at the end of the day. You might think, too, of how much space a child occupies, where the child tends to position him- or herself in a group, etc.

Locate the child in motion, physically engaged, both outdoors and indoors. For example, you might think of what the child likes to do outdoors (such as bike riding, exploring, sports, etc.) and notice to yourself the energy, pace, and gestures involved. Do the same for active indoor play such as dress-up, block building, and other construction, etc. Then think of the child quietly occupied; for example, drawing, reading, observing, conversing, etc. What pace and gestures are characteristic in these occupations? Think about where the child seems most at ease and how you can tell that is so; then take it other side round and think of where the child seems least comfortable or most constrained.

Other slants you might take on the child's presence include the voice, its inflection, volume, and rhythm; characteristic phrases and ways of speaking; the expressiveness of the eyes, hands, and mouth; where the child's feelings can be read (and how easily); where and when energy flows most easily and smoothly; where energy seems to be concentrated; how tension shows itself; etc.

Attending to expression makes a natural bridge to the child's **disposition and temperament**. You might start by reflecting on how the child usually greets the world. Or to say that a little differently, you might think of how you would describe the child's most typical attitudes toward life.

With these characteristic feeling tones at the center, picture to yourself the sort of emotional terrain the child covers in the course of a day and also according to a variety of circumstances: some children (and people) tend to maintain an even, steady emotional balance; others are quick to laughter and quick to tears; still others are likely to be inward turned and unlikely to display their feelings, etc.

Think, too, about what the child cares for deeply and what stirs deep feeling. Similarly, reflect on what goes against the child's honor or sense of rightness or justice and where the child has deep loyalties and strong personal commitments. Reflect, too, on how these deep feelings tend to be expressed.

Connections with other people are not easily separable from disposition and temperament. First, gather in your mind some examples of the child in the company of other children. In the classroom or at home, think about the location of the child in relation to the larger community of children. That is, reflect on where you usually see her or him; how s/he goes about making a place for her- or himself; how s/he tends to move into a new group or to respond to unfamiliar children.

Picture to yourself the range of the child's relationships with other children; for example, think about any children with whom the child has formed a close, enduring relationship, but also think of how the child falls in with more loosely connected groups that may form around games or other classroom or neighborhood activities. Reflect on what the child's role is within friendships and small groups; with brothers and/or sisters or other close relatives; within larger groups.

Give some attention to how the child responds if difficulties arise in a group or with a friend or if s/he, or another child, is in distress or left out, etc. Also think about when the child prefers to be alone or left to her or his own devices.

Now you might shift your attention to the child in relation to you or other adults. Think first of the child's characteristic responses and ways of connecting with adults and also the range of these. Picture, for example, how the child greets familiar adults and the kind of contact the child establishes in the course of the day. For example, if there are adults who are sought out, reflect on what draws the child to them; if there are others who are ignored or avoided, think about what keeps the child at a distance.

Think, too, about the child's preferred ways of being with you or with other adults and what the child expects back from you. Another point of reflection might be the way the child negotiates the transition from one adult to another. Yet another might be your sense of what makes the child feel safe, trusted, respected, and secure with adults (or not).

Now give some attention to how you and other adults tend to welcome the child and generally respond to him or her. Think about how easily you or other adults recognize and value the child and how you or others express that to him or her. If the child is hard to see, give some thought to what keeps the child hidden from you or others. Reflect, too, on what adult responses, interests, and ways of being hold the child's interest and win her or his respect and, alternatively, which kinds of responses or attitudes are likely to put the child off or lead to anger or conflict.

Children, like adults, tend to have **strong interests and preferences** that are absorbing and long-lasting. From my experience, these are likely to offer much valuable insight in terms of the child's entries into learning and particular talents to be nurtured. I like to start by making a list of all the things I know a child really likes, such as particular foods (or eating in general!), colors, people, animals, places (indoors or outdoors), and a parallel list of what I know the child dislikes or finds repellent. Quite often when I look at these lists, patterns emerge of which I wasn't previously aware. Think, too, about the ways the child expresses these likes and dislikes and how likely they are to change or to be sustained.

A next step is to make a list of any questions, wonderings, or curiosities that have stirred the child's mind and imagination, giving special attention to those that persist or are recurrent. Here, too, it is interesting to look for patterns among these – for example, connections and contrasts – and also for range. Reflect, too, on how these questions and interests are expressed; for example, in play, in choices of books or films, in conversation, in drawing or construction, etc.

Closely related to this, picture the media and the play that most capture her or his attention. I find it helpful to start by recalling what the child is likely to do if s/he has choice and plenty of time; for example, listening to stories; reading and books; building with blocks; making 'small worlds'; drawing; writing; painting; junk construction; sand or water; video games; the natural world; games and sports; making large scale forts or houses; etc. Here, too, lists are often useful and again usually yield patterns and give a good sense of the range of play and media in which the child finds satisfaction. I often start this listing with favorite stories and books, television programs, and movies, and turn next to play, games, and activities that are absorbing.

Other interesting points of reflection are the kinds of 'props' that are part of a child's preferred play and activities (dress up clothes, boxes, miniature figures, balls, wheeled vehicles, etc.); the ways that play or activities may be linked to particular seasons or time of day; or the role the child tends to assume in keeping group play and activities going and developing. Sometimes, too, there are particular figures or especially interesting topics or themes featured in the play a child prefers; for example, super heroes or knights or battles or space or dinosaurs or ninja turtles or olden times or disasters or fairy tales or . . . (this list is virtually endless in its possibilities).

Think, too, about what seems to you to be really satisfying and fulfilling about these kinds of play, interests, and activities. And reflect, too, on the standards the child observes around this play; for example, what makes it 'go right'; what spoils it; what 'rules' or customs do other children have to observe in order to be part of the play, etc.

In my experience, the child's preferences, interests, and choices are windows to the child's **modes of thinking and learning**. Through these windows it is possible to glimpse how a child goes about making sense of the world and her (his) own experience. Or, to say that a little differently, from noticing those world themes that fascinate a child, it is possible to intuit fields of study that will have a strong appeal. In a parallel way, attention to play – as a sort of thinking space of the child's own making – yields insights about the child as a maker of knowledge.

A good place to start is to think of things, ideas, or media for which a child has an inner sense or 'feel'; for example, machines or music or language or people or throwing a ball or animals or drama or number or color or paint or the piano or building or . . . (again the possible list is virtually endless). Another way to approach this is to reflect on what the child has always done or does with great ease.

Think, too, about how, through what situations and experiences, this "feel" or inner sense is observable to you and others. Give some thought to whether the child recognizes these talents. This is important to consider since often people take their greatest strengths as givens and, although they rely on them, are not aware of them. I don't personally think that it is always a good idea to point these strengths out to another person since for some that could be inhibiting or embarrassing. I do think, though, that having a sense of where children stand in relation to their own abilities is useful to a parent or a teacher. Then, it is a matter of judgment based on your other knowledge of the child and the nature of your relationship to him or her, to make the decision on what will best support and assist the child's development of these strengths.

Looking in another direction, think to yourself how the child gains a firm understanding or internalizes knowledge or is inclined to figure things out. For example, there may be an inclination to map or sketch or draw or construct or graph. Or, equally, a child may rely a lot on a strong capacity for observing and remembering. Or, perhaps the child gets to know something by talking it through or dramatizing and enacting it. There may be interest in taking things apart and putting them back together; or looking at things or ideas from many angles; or counting, ordering, and creating patterns; or discovering what makes something happen by trying different combinations; or looking things up in books; or studying pictures or photographs . . . (again, the possible list is virtually endless).

Since we all have many ways of figuring things out, spend some time reflecting on when the child is likely to prefer a particular approach and when that may be discarded in favor of another. I have noticed, too, that usually there are observable connections among the range of approaches. For example, a five-year-old child of my acquaintance, much interested in nature and natural objects, was a close observer and an astute connector of events. (“Grown-ups . . . mow down the dandelions because they grow bumblebees. I know. I saw them together and they were both yellow.”) While the conclusion is faulty, the logic is sturdy. He was also an able tree climber, using the trees as an observation point that gave him new and different perspectives on the world.

Sometimes, and especially from children’s questions and wonderings, it is possible to glimpse what I think of as a sort of bent or inclination. Some children incline toward imaginative, poetic comparisons with an eye to surprising likenesses between objects or events that on the surface are quite different. To offer one example, I once overheard a child of about three say softly, to herself, “rain” as she observed her mother’s long dark hair to fall back, catching the light and shimmering as it flowed. Both the comparison and the image that captured it were apt. Or there may be a philosophical, reflective, and speculative talent or the child may have a religious or spiritual bent. There may be an attraction to the big picture and big ideas or the child may be adept at seeing the outline or structure that holds things or ideas together or there may be an attraction to textures and small detail. There may be an experimental or problem-solving slant on the world and an interest in casual relationships.

However, it’s important to keep in mind that in life children draw on all these and more. So, even if there is a strong bent in one direction, don’t overlook others that may be there. One of the things about us humans is that we are complicated. Given that complexity, in my experience, creating types or categories of thinkers and learners tends not to do a child (or adult) justice or to be especially helpful in the long run to the parents and teachers responsible for that child’s learning and education.

From this bigger picture of the child’s ways of making sense of things, you might focus in on the narrower piece of the child learning something specific; for example, a task or skill. I often find it useful to think first of how the child positions her- or himself as a learner. Some children (and adults) tend to plunge right in or take some other “I’ll do it myself” approach. Some children (and adults) want a lot of time to observe and to practice privately on their own. Some of these same persons value the chance to sit alongside someone else doing the task and follow along, sometimes asking questions. Some children (and adults) want one-on-one instruction; others shy away from any direct contact with a teacher. Some children (and adults) like working on something new in a sort of social, cooperative group; others like to be on their own.

Again, the picture that emerges is complex. Much may depend on what is being learned and

much may also depend on the degree of trust that exists between a child and a teacher or among a group of children. A way to get at this complexity is to think of how the child positions her- or himself when the task or skill to be learned is self-selected; next to that picture, reflect on how the child positions her- or himself when the task is assigned or has a strict time limit or is in other ways pressured. The contrast in these circumstances contributes nuance to the portrayal of the child as a learner.

Other slants you might try include picturing the child's responses when mistakes or accidents happens; when it is necessary to re-work or do something over; when there are interruptions; when the situation is highly competitive; when the child has options about leaving and returning to a task as compared to a start-to-finish expectation, etc. Or, you might think of specific skills the child has easily mastered and those that have been more difficult, giving particular attention to surrounding circumstances and other factors that have helped or hindered the child.

Thinking again more broadly, reflect on the subject matters or fields of study to which the child gravitates; for example, science, history, literature, art, drama, music, geography, math (etc). Note to yourself what seems to make these attractive and also how the child engages with these modes of thinking and learning. Think, too, about how these interests might be supported, deepened, and expanded. It is also worthwhile to give thought to the future and the learning opportunities that need to be sustained and others that should probably be made available as s/he grows older. If there are disciplines the child finds boring or actively dislikes, reflect on those with particular attention to what seems to distance the child.

Finally, reflect on the standards the child tends to hold for her- or himself and how these may vary depending on circumstances. Think first about the child's own pride of work and in what places and circumstances that is visible and observable. A useful way to approach this is to think of times and pieces of work that have been really pleasing to the child; and the converse – times and pieces of work that have been displeasing.

In a more general way, reflect on what seems to influence the value a child accords to their own work, when the work and learning are the child's choice. Think, too, of how that maybe the same or different when the child finds the task to be mastered boring or distasteful or hard. Taking a slightly different approach, call to mind any situations that would allow you to glimpse how outside expectations and standards affect the child's learning and self-evaluation. It is also useful to give thought to how the child's standards mesh (or don't) with external standards held at school or at home.

What I have outlined above asks for a lot of thinking and reflecting. It isn't necessary to do this all at once nor is it important if there are sections under each heading that don't ring any bells. Ignore them. Equally, this is an outline and there is a lot that isn't touched on. Add in anything that comes to mind – including other headings if that seems useful. Remember, this is an exercise and an organizing device. Use it only in the degree that it is helpful to you in picturing the child and expanding your understandings of him or her as a person.

As a conclusion to this exercise, and especially if the picture of the child has become very full and complex, I find it useful to write down words or phrases the child brings to mind. Some of these turn out to be images; others are simply vocabulary that seems particularly apt for describing the child. Quite often, among these, there are ones that seem especially to capture the sense of the person. I remember, for example a teacher's description of a child's way of moving *and* his way of thinking as "quick-silver"; or an image of a child's warmth and clarity that was

made vivid by likening her to her own drawings and paintings in which there is often a suffusion of yellow light or a figure is seen through a transparent surface. I mention these for the reasons that one of the yields of doing this kind of exercise is the discovery of a vocabulary that is *particular* to the child: not jargon, not labels, not categorizations or stereotypes, not empty generalization applicable to virtually anyone and everyone.

I find this kind of recollecting of children refreshing and renewing of my faith in our human-ness. I hope you will too. It is always easy to criticize and find fault with children (or other adults), to point out what they can't do and how problematic they are. It takes more time and patience to paint a fuller picture in which the person is understood to be not the sum of unchanging traits but in process, in the making. Understood as active and open-ended, each of us is at any moment in our lives, and in all taken together, a complex blend of failings and virtues, of strengths and vulnerabilities. It seems to me that this is what makes us interesting and what makes education (and not merely training) a possibility. I hope you will find the time it takes to look at children (and adults) this way worth the patience it requires.

I won't give this letter a formal closing, but simply extend my best to you and to all the children you attend to with care.

Patricia Carini

Fall 1993

Notes: Three full Descriptive Reviews of the Child are presented in Himley, M. with P. Carini, *From Another Angle* (chapters 2, 5, 8). Two full Descriptive Reviews of the Child of one child, appear in *Jenny's Story: Taking the Long View of the Child*: the first by the child's mother (chapter 1, pp. 22-34), the second by one of the child's teachers (chapter 2, pp. 41-51).

To learn more about Descriptive Review of the Child where the parent is a presenter or co-presenter, see the role of Tisa Williams in *Jenny's Story: Taking the Long View of the Child*. (pp.11-34, pp. 48 – 49, pp. 64-73, pp. 167-170); and the role of Mrs. Booker in *Inviting Families Into the Classroom: Learning From a Life in Teaching*, (pp. 98-100). See also "Observing, Documenting, Presenting," by Mary Hebron, (pp. 77-84 below).

**[3] "Descriptive Review of the Child: Observing and Describing Babies and Adolescents"
by Patricia F. Carini**

Introduction. The Descriptive Review of the Child isn't a script or technique. It does not aim to provide or draw conclusions. It is a *process*, and as such, is ever in the making in response to deepened insight, to changed circumstances, and to need. Reflective of this responsiveness, its history is a history of change, mostly in the direction of greater transparency and openness. Originally called the Staff Review of the Child, the change to Descriptive Review of the Child was occasioned by circumstance – the inclusion of parents in child reviews – and also by heightened awareness of the power of description to give value and a degree of access to the complexity of the child. Later, the language of “recommendations” was amended to “suggestions” to recognize that the parent or teacher preparing a description of a child is likely, by that act alone, to experience fresh insights, new ways of seeing the child, which in the review itself will be helped along by the responses and observations of colleagues. In this respect, it was noticeable that often when it came time for “recommendations,” the presenting teacher or parent was a major contributor, and in any event, it made sense that deepened insight and heightened awareness would naturally find expression in the teacher's or parent's ways of relating to the child. In response to these observations, “recommendations,” with its connotations of “do this” and its smack of “problem solved,” jarred against the guiding philosophy of unfinish and open-endedness the Descriptive Review of the Child espouses.

Allowing for changes like these, what has remained constant in the Descriptive Review of the Child for over four decades is the usefulness of a constructed conversation, guided by headings, for the purpose of describing the child fully and with attention to safeguarding her or his sense of self. To describe a person, child or adult, requires a certain humility. However full and embedded in respectful observation, a description is always partial. Nothing human is set in stone. The person described is true to her own self, recognizable to herself, in terms and ways accessible only to her, even as she is also changing. The Descriptive Review of the Child values that interiority and strives to honor it. For all these reasons, the confidentiality of what is said is an unchanging requirement for all Descriptive Reviews.

The headings themselves are also a constant, though there may be variations in how they are worded. Their cumulative intention is to provide a rounded view, and indeed, each heading tends to blend with the one following. Physical Presence and Gesture, with its attention to rhythms and intensity of expression, is near neighbor to Disposition and Temperament, which in turn blends with how an infant or child or adolescent connects with others, and so on.

The headings are also deliberately broad. What particularizes them are the descriptors of what a presenter might include within its boundaries to prompt thought, reflection, recollection, and further observation of the person being described (see “A Letter to Parents and Teachers,” pp. 13-19). The descriptors for a heading may vary somewhat in response to the importance or aptness of a heading for a particular review. Less frequently, but it has happened, there is a variation in a heading itself for similar reasons. For example, in a variation in which a child's engagement with language had particular interest, space was made for the presenter to describe the expressive and communicative aspects of the child's language and the interplay of language and thinking. It seems important to note with respect to this variation that there had been a prior Descriptive Review of the Child in which the usual headings were fully developed. For this subsequent review, these were presented in briefer form to make time for the fuller look at language.

What follows starts with what it is about infancy and adolescence that may seem to require a

variation in the headings for the Descriptive Review of the Child, or if not in the headings per se, in the focus of the description the heading invites. It is assumed in what follows that a parent or teacher presenting a Descriptive Review of a Baby or of an Adolescent, and also the Chair for the review, have experience with the Descriptive Review of the Child – its headings, purposes, philosophy of the person, and guiding principles.

Descriptive Review of a Baby. Preparing and presenting a review of an infant or baby under a year old, is usually by parents or other caregiver intimately involved with the baby, often around the clock, or in the instance of childcare centers, for extended periods. The knowledge of parents and caregivers is intimate and it is extensive. Perhaps for that reason, those caught up in caring for infants don't always recognize how much they know. Infants are not self-sufficient. To thrive, each one requires nurturing: holding, rocking, cuddling, feeding, lulling to sleep, engagement in play and rhyming and songs. It can be and typically is exhausting. Yet, it is as true that the baby is a wonder, a marvel, a delight. Each one from the moment of the transition from the womb is ineffably this particular baby. No two are identical, not even twins.

A review of an infant starts from there: to capture this particular baby's expressiveness, the rhythms that pattern the day, the responsiveness to this gesture, to that way of being held, to this position when feeding, and so on. Observation is foundational to the Descriptive Review of the Child. Practice for observing babies can happen at home or in a childcare center by keeping a baby journal, and making a note or two each day describing something about the baby. A note – not a full-scale account. Keep it brief. At the end of the week, reread what you have written and perhaps pull together what stands out when you look back over the week. Many childcare centers make it a practice to keep baby diaries or journals to share with the parents or guardians. It is an invaluable gift and a perfect fit with the Descriptive Review of the Child and its emphasis on observation.

For a childcare center faculty or a parent group interested in doing Descriptive Reviews it can be helpful to start by describing a photograph or a film of a baby: first impressions (what stands out) followed by each person in turn describing some feature of the photograph or film, including where the baby is located, the expression on the face, the way the hands, the legs, the feet are held or move and so on. Another way to start is a reflection on the word "baby." What meanings (words, phrases, images) does "baby" connote? What polarities does it encompass? For example to be called "baby" can be a term of endearment. It can also be pejorative: babyish, infantile. Equally it can connote care and tenderness and also exhaustion and sleepless nights. And so on.

Another starting option is to have each member of a review group bring a recollective observation of a baby's physical presence and gesture (see pp. 25-26). To prepare the recollective observation, you might start with how old the baby is and how big, moving on to what stands out immediately, whatever that might be, including hair (or lack thereof), eyes, mouth, hands, energy, etc. How he or she prefers to be held and by whom, what soothes, what catches the baby's attention, how the baby relates to sounds (music, noise, laughter, loud noises). The range of sounds the baby makes in inflection, volume, and rhythm can all be included in the description. Include, too, how the baby's gestures and expressiveness vary by time of day -- when the baby is first awake, when she or he is fully alert, when tired, when hungry, when nursing (and so on). Taking a different slant, tell how the baby responds gesturally and expressively to objects, to some new plaything, or some new experience

As the above suggests, when observing and describing a baby, the *body's expressiveness* encompassed by the heading Physical Presence and Gesture is rich with possibilities. Its borders

with Disposition and Temperament are porous, and both headings with Connections with Others. This is not to say that Strong Interests and Preferences and Modes of Thinking and Learning play a lesser role though particularly the latter is ever more observable as the baby grows. Strong Interests and Preferences include: food, response to nursing, what holds the baby's attention (own hand, someone's finger, the binding of a blanket, whatever the hand can grasp, a stuffed animal, and so on). Here the border with Modes of Learning and Thinking is shallow. Like Preferences, it has to do with what recurs – a characteristic way of approaching a new object or a way of exploring what catches her or his attention. For this heading, watching a baby interested in something is the focus. Here is where an observation journal is especially useful: preferences may not abruptly change but the relationship to what interests does, and often at a remarkable pace: “Guess what she did today?” “He said “Dah” each time I handed him the little dog he likes so much.” As language makes its appearance, access to interests, preferences, and modes of learning and thinking takes an exponential leap.

Because a baby is a prodigious learner, keeping even minimal track of all that is happening over the first 12 months is no small task. Much will be missed. But what is observed, what is caught in motion, marks the beginnings of a new life. The adventure of living a life has begun.

In the home into which a child is born, all objects change their significance; they begin to await some indeterminate treatment at his hands; another and different person is there, a new personal account, short or long, has just been initiated, another account has been opened.

(M, Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, London: Routledge Kegan & Paul, 1962, page 407).

Descriptive Review of an Adolescent. Describing adolescents typically has less to do with adjusting the headings of the Descriptive Review of the Child and more to do with opportunities for observing. It is a rare middle or high school in which a teacher is with the same group of young people for the greater part of the day, able to see them in a variety of situations. More often than not, the time for observing may at a glance seem restricted to a class period during which freedom to move around or speak informally may be bounded by bells and rules. Possibilities multiply for those who teach art, music, drama, physical education, shop, home economics, hands-on science or any other course of study that engages students in active exploration of materials, or that sometimes happens outside the school building. In some secondary schools advisories bring a teacher together on a regular basis with a group of young people largely unrestricted by the demands of formal course work. Equally, opportunities for observing are multiplied for teachers who advise or coach extra-curricular activities. For all teachers, there are points of transition, those moments when students are entering (or leaving) the room, when there may be time for casual conversation or activity, that are often rich with observation opportunities. How any person enters a space, settles or doesn't, uses free time prior to class and connects with others has its own patterns, its own points of access to the expressiveness of the person.

What I am emphasizing with these examples is the value for secondary teachers interested in the Descriptive Review process in particularizing the opportunities they do have – and perhaps to expand some of these examples for the express purpose of enhancing those opportunities. Making a list of such opportunities is a starting place. When we consciously aim to focus on observing and describing, that in itself has an alerting effect. Knowing that the aim of observing is solid description, full with example, and free from school-bound judgments and evaluations, is the key

to taking advantage of what opportunities do exist. If transitional moments have a rich yield it may be possible at times to stretch them a bit. If a conversation has started on its own, it may be possible to join it in ways productive for the students. If there is a student teacher, she or he can take an observer role or be in charge so the teacher can assume that role. If possible, the presenting teacher may want to include other teachers familiar with the Descriptive Review process and with the young person being reviewed. When observations by other teachers are included in a review, it is usual for the Chair to invite these contributions following integration of main themes from the presenting teacher's description. Informally interviewing students about something of interest to them often leads to insights that might otherwise be missed. Asking students to write autobiographically works for some, not for others. If you receive works made by the student – a notebook, an essay, a drawing, a construction, observations, etc.– take time to notice how it was made and to the best of your ability, to describe it (even if briefly). When describing the work, steer clear of evaluating the work or holding it to an external standard. The Descriptive Reviews of Children's Works (pp. 27-29, 30-36, 37-40, and 41) are useful resources as is the essay "Poets of Our Loves" in *Starting Strong* (Carini, P. F., Teachers College Press, 2001) and in *Jenny's Story*, "Jarring Perception Three," and Chapter 4 (Carini, P. F. and Himley, M. with Christine, C., Espinosa C., Fournier, J., Teachers College Press, 2009).

To practice observing and describing, it works well to choose a young person who interests you and is someone you have opportunity to see both in and out of class. Maybe someone in your advisory. Maybe someone you encounter through a club or other extra-curricular activity. Avoid the temptation to focus on someone who is in trouble or otherwise stands out as a "problem." The Descriptive Review isn't a problem-solving technique. It relies on attentiveness to a person's capacities, and supporting these, to open a door for both the young person making her or his way to adulthood and for the teacher. For purposes of getting started, it helps to choose a young person who catches your attention, someone about whom negative evaluations haven't been made, at least by you. This begins the process from the angle of "getting to know" or "getting to know better" – which is the large purpose of the Descriptive Review. Once you have made your choice, write notes of what you have already picked up, and equally any questions you may have. Here the headings and the descriptors for each heading can be useful -- both as reminders of what you have noticed and also of where to focus as opportunity arises. From that starting point, make it a habit to jot down notes of what you notice whenever your paths cross -- daily, if possible. At the end of the week pull these together in a **short** descriptive paragraph, noting a reminder to yourself of headings for which you have little or nothing as an alert to yourself to be aware of opportunities to fill in these blanks.

A couple of other thoughts before turning to the Descriptive Review headings: A Descriptive Review of Work has the advantage that, unlike the Descriptive Review of the Child, it is unmediated by adult perspectives, and can be counted upon to yield insights and to point directions for future observing. A Descriptive Review of Work also has the advantage that, guided by the chair for the review, those describing – perhaps a newly formed group of teachers/parents – are all actively engaged in the process. Another starting place for description of adolescents is a session devoted to recollections from adolescence (early or later). The focus might be compelling interests, perhaps newly discovered; learning experiences, in or out of school, that made a difference; personal aspirations and/or yearnings for wider horizons, for something beyond one's self. These sorts of recollections alert adults to the inner world of adolescents, of the new life beginning by grounding that experience in our own. The Descriptive Review of an Adolescent is intended to safeguard that interiority and to honor the young person's sense of self. Since adolescents are not infrequently cynically dismissed by adults, who may also be unnerved by their youth and their challenge to preceding generations, the Descriptive Review

of an Adolescent serves a particularly valuable function. The words Toni Morrison has the children in the parable she crafts in her Nobel Lecture speak to an old, wise, Black writer woman are testimony to the responsibility of age to youth:

You trivialize us. . . . Is there no context for our lives? No song, no literature, no poem full of vitamins, no history connected to experience that you can pass along to help us start strong? You are an adult. The old one, the wise one. Stop thinking about saving your face. Think of our lives and tell us your particularized world. Make up a story. . . . For our sake and yours forget your name in the street; tell us what the world has been to you in the dark places and the light. Don't tell us what to believe, what to fear. Show us belief's wide skirt and the stitch that unravels fear's caul. . . .
(p. 17; 18)

Words worth remembering for us all, for the future of the young lies in all our hands, in how we value their lives, their loves, their dreams. Recollecting ourselves when on the threshold of adult life helps build a bridge across the generational divide. (For guidelines for Recollections, see pp. 58-60.)

The headings and the descriptors they subsume often require little more than tweaking or particular emphasis when reviewing an adolescent. Prior to reviewing an adolescent, refer to the discussion in "A Letter to Parents and Teachers..." (pp.13-19), substituting adolescent for child, with an eye to amending or adding descriptors as seems necessary. **A final reminder: all descriptive reviews are confidential and discussion of the proceedings is restricted to the group who participated in the review.**

[4] “Recollecting and Describing Physical Presence and Gesture: A Group Process,” adapted from Guidelines for Prospect’s Fall Conference 2002 by Patricia Carini and Betsy Wice.

This process offers to all participants an opportunity to practice observation and description during a single session. It uses the first heading of Descriptive Review of the Child (pp. 10-12, 13-19). There are two variations:

Variation One: Group members prepare ahead of time. Using the guidelines below (Preparing the Description), each group member chooses a young person to observe and describe. Some group members may have a chance to record observations while watching the young person. Others may draw on memory to recollect a child they know well (a “recollective observation”).

Variation Two: Group members receive the guidelines on the spot, at the session, so there is no chance to prepare ahead of time. As with Reflections (p. 42) and Recollections (pp. 58-60), there is a quiet time (perhaps 15 minutes) at the start of the session, a time for each group member to think and write.

Guidelines for Describing Physical Presence and Gesture

Introduction:

The chair explains that this is an exercise in recollecting and describing. The description can be of any child of any age: your own child, a relative, a child you teach. The chair emphasizes the confidentiality of the presentations, that everything said stays within the circle.

Preparing the Description:

[This part may be done ahead of time, but it can also happen during a 15-minute quiet space after the participants have had a chance to look over the following guidelines.]

The recollective part is to re-visualize the child whose physical presence and gesture you have chosen to describe. To do this you might picture the child in different location and settings; in a variety of postures and moods; listening with an inner ear to the child’s voice as you do so. It is helpful while recollecting to make notes descriptive of the child using language that is meant to picture the child for others – not to critique or judge or analyze the child, or to ascribe motive to the child’s actions.

Working from the notes made while recollecting the child, the next step is to organize them. First you might speak to what stands out to you immediately – something about the child you first noticed. Then, you might take note of size and build, and also of dress, color preferences, prized possessions, etc. Visualize for those listening how the child moves, with particular attention to pace, characteristic rhythm and gestures, and how they may vary. For example, you might think about how the child tends to enter the classroom or the child’s pace at home first thing in the morning or at the end of the day. You might think, too, of how much space a child occupies, where the child tends to position him- or her- self in a group and so forth.

Locate the child in motion, physically engaged both indoors and outdoors. For example, you might think of what the child likes to do outdoors (such as bike riding, exploring, sports, etc) and describe the energy, pace and gestures involved. Do the same for indoor play, such as dress-up, art projects, block building, and other construction. Then, think about the child quietly occupied; for example, drawing, reading, observing, conversing. What pace and gestures are characteristic

of these occupations? Think about where the child seems most at ease and how you tell that is so; then take it other side round and think of where the child seems least comfortable or most constrained.

Other slants you might take on the child's presence include: the voice, its inflection, volume, and rhythm, characteristic phrases and ways of speaking; the expressiveness of the eyes, hands, and mouth; where the child's feelings can be read (and how easily), where and when energy flows most smoothly; where energy seems to be concentrated; how tension shows itself; and so forth.

Picturing a child for others, plentiful examples are helpful and serve to ground the description. If I say a child moves quickly, or that a child is typically highly concentrated, that is easier for others to visualize if I supply illustrations.

Hearing the Descriptions:

Each person in the group might have about 6 minutes to present her (his) description. Others in the group are asked to be attentive to what made the child come alive for them. The chairperson may pose supportive questions and will also draw out main themes, images from the description.

Either at the end of each description, or when all have been reported, the chairperson will invite responses to the following questions:

- What was learned by doing the observation?
- What questions did it prompt?
- What did it make you think about?

A final reminder: all descriptive reviews are confidential and discussion of the proceedings is restricted to the group who participated in the review.

THE CHILD: DESCRIPTIVE REVIEW OF WORKS

[5] “Collecting and Describing Children’s Works at Prospect” by Patricia F. Carini (August 1995, edited August 2001)

At Prospect, we began looking at children’s ‘works’ in the early 1970’s. ‘Works’ meant to us then very much what it means to teachers involved with Prospect’s descriptive processes now, more than twenty years later: anything that children make, construct, or write, including but not limited to drawings; paintings; collage; sculpture; sewing; block, wood, Lego, and junk constructions; photographs and films; stories, poems, reports, and informational writing. When I say ‘not limited to,’ I am referring to masking tape, staples, glue, twine, string, aluminum foil, dirt, snow, twigs, vines, cones, nuts, shells, stones, flowers, cooking and baking supplies, and so much more that I have seen commandeered as writing, drawing, or construction materials by children intent on ‘making and doing.’ ‘Not limited to’ is also my way of leaving the gate ajar for the play and expressiveness, the making and doing, that does not leave in its wake a tangible product – but can be filmed or partially captured through observation: dramatic play, music, dance, gymnastics and acrobatics and sports, to name a few of these.

By the 1970s our collection of works, especially visual works, constructions, and writing, were already substantial. And, in tandem, there was a solid and growing complement of observations of the children who attended Prospect School at play, making things and talking, and of the classrooms and other settings in which these things happened. These collections and observations reflected the importance attached by those of us who shaped the school’s philosophy and practice to giving children access to open-ended, malleable materials, choice among these, and substantial blocks of time for exploration and making things.

When I set out to compose these recollections, I looked back at some of the documentations of the school and the curriculum that the Prospect staff produced at the school during the early ‘70s as a way of refreshing my memory of what was in the classrooms and what the children were doing with these materials. I was amazed all over again by the variety, by how much of what was in use fell into the categories of found objects, natural materials, and ordinary sorts of household supplies, and by the rich curricular yield from the children’s investigations of these materials.

Wax to make candles in a multiage group of 7-10 year olds in 1972-73 evolved from dipped candles to ice cube candles to sand and clay casting. Wax casts were made of fingers and hands and used as molds to make plaster of paris hand sculptures. Plaster of paris was used with fabric strips to make wrist and arm casts. Flowers, berries, nuts, mushrooms and other things found outdoors were cast in wax. In its solid state, wax was carved; melted, it was colored and used to make poured sculptures and drip pictures. Wax was used functionally to seal and preserve jam and pickles. Running parallel with these explorations of wax, of molding, of casting, of preserving, of dipping and dripping were discussions that compared the properties of beeswax and paraffin, of candlelight and electric light, of changing wax by melting, coloring, carving, etc.

The documentation I happened to look at most closely listed other important sources of curriculum at that time such as *The Little House* series of books with lots of gathering food from the environment, maple sugaring, and cooking (with a heavy emphasis on yeast bread); fairytales and costumes and dramatic sets; sand and water; clay; weaving; digging up old things (broken pottery, tools, etc.); bones; plants; painting, murals, collage, and rubbings; blocks; contra dancing and sports. Glancing through a documentation from a couple of years later, a major activity recorded for the oldest children (ages 11-14) was ‘miniature worlds’ prompted by a collection of

tiny hinged stuffed bears. Among the things reported as made for these little bears were camping and ski equipment and other costumes and houses and furniture, culminating in the construction of a large and fully decorated ‘bear house,’ built to scale and with both an upstairs and downstairs. Stories and plays were written and enacted around the bears and their various adventures and props and a group of children made a movie.

Of course, as I scan these documentations, the records are brought to life by my own memories of specific children or a particularly lively discussion of a ‘disaster’ or some highly inventive or ingenious creation from some unlikely material or the exasperation of a child who had hit yet another snag in a difficult process or project. And I am reminded by all these memories that for us at Prospect *collecting children’s works* was in response to the children’s passion for making things. A passion expressed sometimes by persistence, sometimes by delight, sometimes by frustration and anger, sometimes by playfulness, sometimes by deep seriousness – and all of these together and more.

And I am further reminded that collecting these products was part of a larger scheme of observing, recording, and documenting class activities and the growth and learning of individual children. That is, the collections of children’s works did not stand alone. They were not our only source for getting to know the children or for gaining better understanding of how children, individually and collectively, go about making sense of the world. Collecting the children’s works was nested together with daily and weekly observing and descriptive recording, the biannual writing of narrative reports, and the yearly documenting of curriculum. Collectively, these composed a sort of over-text of moments captured in the life of a school, in the life of a classroom, in the life of a child. Moments that as a staff we could use as reference points for reflecting together on children, on learning and thinking, and on the work of educating.

This use of what we were collecting by reflecting and describing observations, records, and works – and doing that together, collaboratively, as a staff – led to the invention of what are sometimes summed up at this point in time as the ‘Prospect processes.’ The first of these processes, named initially the Staff Review of the Child, and subsequently the Descriptive Review of the Child, embodied by the early ‘70s key ideas and commitments that were incorporated in other of the processes, including the Descriptive Review of Children’s Works. Among these were the importance of viewing a child or a child’s works (or a teacher’s practice or an issue, or a curriculum) from several angles and perspectives, using language that is as descriptive as possible. The aim, regardless of subject – child, child’s works, teacher’s practice – was to arrive at a full and balanced portrayal, not complete or conclusive, but rich and nuanced.

As a staff, we were slower to develop a process for looking at children’s works than for portraying a child. There were reasons for that slowness. Some staff, and I was among them, were uneasy about the heavily psychological interpretations quite typically (and glibly) imposed on children’s drawings and writing. We weren’t interested in using the works to measure intelligence or to categorize children according to personality types or a developmental stage. Still, our caution about not imposing these kinds of schemas on the works didn’t stop us from looking at the works and appreciating them. Sometimes, a child’s works were brought in as illustrations of her interests and capacities during the weekly Descriptive Reviews of the Child. We also sometimes assembled the works, especially the visual arts products, by motifs such as drawings of houses, trees, suns or of battles or of dinosaurs to get a sense of what children explored through these popular and recurrent images and the spectrum these created across media and through the ways different children handled and interpreted them. We learned a lot from this, actually; for example, that for all the many drawings children make of houses, trees, and suns,

and contrary to our expectation, no two are the same. Nor, we discovered, is any one child's repertoire of these common elements nearly as repetitive as we had judged them to be before we paused to take a really close look.

As the works accumulated, I recognized (or thought I did) a continuousness in each individual child's collection. I intuited this to be a kind of personal signature that remained amidst all the changes in a collection associated with age and expanding influences, and that was also visible across media. This was intriguing. It occurred to me that if we could track that continuousness (and the changes) across a collection of works from age four or five to age fourteen, these might provide an important perspective on the maker. It was Beth Alberty, a Prospect member with a strong background in art history, who resolved how we might do this tracking with the suggestion that just as we relied on describing the child, we could rely on describing the child's works. Once said, it seemed the obvious thing to do. The Description of Children's Works was launched.

Notes: The Prospect Archives of Children's Works contain over 250,000 pieces of student writing, drawing, painting, 3D construction, work in other mediums, and teacher records from the Prospect School. They are housed at the University of Vermont Bailey/Howe Library in Special Collections. We have produced from the Archive a Reference Edition of the Prospect Archive – a multi-media publication consisting of microfiche, slides, and typescripts of the works of 36 children, each spanning five years or more, along with teachers' written records and narrative reports and a catalogue of each child's work by year.

Information about the Prospect Archive, including the files of nine children from the Reference Edition are available on line through the Center for Digital Initiatives, Bailey/Howe Library website:
<http://cdi.uvm.edu/collections/getCollection.xql?pid=prospect&title=Prospect>
<http://cdi.uvm.edu/collections/getCollection.xql?pid=prospect&title=Prospect>

In the essay "Poets of our Lives", pp. 19-52 in *Starting Strong: A Different Look at Children, School, and Standards*, Patricia Carini discusses the work of three Archive students within a large philosophical context.

Chapter 4, pp. 78-79, *Jenny's Story*, discusses the process for describing children's works, together with descriptions of Jenny's writing and drawings.

[6] “Descriptive Review of Children’s Works” in *Shared Territory: Understanding Children’s Writing as Works* by Margaret Himley (pp. 202-212)

Reflection on the medium or a central motif or keyword (this is optional) (see p. 42)
 The chair’s framing remarks and the focus for the review
 Descriptive paraphrase (of a written text)
 General impressions or responses
 Go-rounds: close description
 Chair restates important themes and ideas after each go-round
 Questions, comments, dialogue
 Evaluation of process

Note: The following is a snapshot of an actual review, conducted at Prospect Summer Institute II (August 1989) and chaired by Patricia F. Carini, which was used in *Shared Territory* to illustrate the process. The time is reduced by two hours to 30 minutes, the descriptive rounds summarized. The review began with a reflection on “fish” and “fishing” and an explanation of the context for the review. The last two parts of the process are not presented here. Paragraphs mark different speakers (or summaries of speakers).

To Be a Good Fisherman
 (written by Matthew at home when he was seven years)

To be a goob Fisherman
 1. First you have to be patient
 or you wont catch any
 fish 2. After you get a
 bite you real it in
 Right. Wrong not right
 then you wait in til
 he has it in his mouth.
 And you jerk him. That
 way you set the hook.
 3. Ther are lots of kinds
 of fishing. In river fishing
 you don’t use a bobber.
 You put a large sinker
 on your line. About
 six inches from the
 swivel and then a hook.
 You cast it out and
 wait intil your poll
 bounces up and down
 4. Lake fishing you
 use a bobbor.
 you put the bobor on
 and you do the same
 thing as river fishing.
 After you do that
 You cast it out and wait
 for the bobber to go
 down 5. Lewer fishing
 is a lot of work you
 have to real in the
 lewer all the time.
 A lewer can be a fish
 or a worm the only
 difrens is that they
 are fake they go
 threw the water like

A real fish or worm.
 Ther is something
 called a weedless worm
 that is what I fish with
 in South Carolin.
 Ther is no fish lewer
 that is weedless. Not
 that I know of.

6. There are all sorts
 of kinds of fish. A catfish
 Has 3 Big spins and
 sharp teeth. So if you
 ever catch a catfish
 grab it right. 7. When
 you clean a fish
 a fish you dont just
 chop his head off and
 eat it. If it is a small
 fish you scale it and
 then chop his head
 off then gut him
 and wash him good.
 If it is a large fish
 you skin it you cut
 a thin line on both side
 of his Fins do the
 same for the belly
 After you are done,
 take a nother thin slice
 on one side of the head
 fin. Then take a
 plers. take a corner
 of the skin and pull
 it on both sids
 Pull the fins and
 chop the head off
 And then your done.

8. When you eat a fish
 you never put anything
 in your mouth with
 it. 9. I have fished in lots
 lakes and rivers
 but the best fishing
 I have ever had is
 in a pond in South
 Carolina. I have
 caught alot of
 fish in that pond.
 From 3 inches long to
 2 pounds.

the end

Descriptive Paraphrase

The writer is giving us advice on how to become a good fisherman, and it's going to be in a series of numbers or directions, the first of which is that you have to be patient, because if you are not patient, you are not going to catch anything. After you feel a bit, you wait until the hook is in its mouth, and then you jerk him and reel him in. That way you are sure the hook is set.

There are many variations of fishing, with different kinds of equipment. You float the bobber, put a weight on the line, separate it from the swivel, cast it out away from yourself, and – this is where the patience comes in – wait for that pole to bounce. Lake fishing is different because you use a bobber, but it’s also the same as river fishing – cast it out, wait for the bobber to dip down. Lure fishing, in addition to requiring patience, is a lot of work, because you have to keep moving the lure, winding it in, letting it out.

Then the writer explains what a lure is – it can be either a fish or a worm – but they’re fake and very good at looking like a fish or worm moving through the water. Then he says there is something called the weedless worm, and I assume that’s another kind of lure (I don’t know much about fishing) and that this is what he uses as a lure when he goes fishing in South Carolina. There is a thing called a weedless lure or weedless worm, and it has to do with how the hook is made, but in fact when you throw it in, you catch weeds anyway. You can’t get rid of the weeds.

Then he says there are all “sorts of kinds of fish,” not just kinds of fish, but he sees this in a larger way. He tells you about the catfish, about the particular care you have to take. He is funny as well as insistent upon making sense. “So if you ever catch a catfish, grab it right.” You bet I will now!

Once you have your catch, it’s real important that you know what to do next, which means the art of cleaning a fish. You don’t just chop its head off and eat it. There’s something else here, having to do with size. There is a difference in treatments between a small fish and a large fish. When you eat a fish, you eat it all by itself. You don’t mix it with other stuff. Yet after all the aesthetics and guidance, it is ultimately the quantity that matters – “from 3 inches to 2 pounds.” The important thing, when all is said and done, is catching a lot of fish.

The fisherman says that he’s had a lot of experience. He’s fished in lots of lakes and rivers, but the best fishing he’s ever had is in a pond in South Carolina, and at that pond he’s caught a lot of fish. They range from three inches long to two pounds.

Chair: We have had a difficult time paraphrasing, which I think is partly because of our lack of knowledge and the precision of the work, and that right away says volumes about this piece.

Descriptive Round One

The writer has taken a rather stern instructional stance, which I would think might be the way he was taught and which might be the way fishing *is* taught, with the more experienced fisher people indoctrinating or initiating the new folk. He’s going to try to do this for us. But the ground rules are that you have to be ready to be serious about this game. And the sign of seriousness is patience. This isn’t just something to take lightly. This is a pursuit that’s going to engage you for quite a while, so don’t bother with it if you’re not going to be patient.

Following up on that, I think that then he patiently outlines – you have to be patient not only in fishing but in reading the description of what it requires. He’s very patient and wants you to be patient with the reading. I think it’s remarkable for his assimilation of the whole procedure or process and his ability to give it back. Obviously, someone has been very explicit that this is not just any old thing, that this is *fishing*, and when you fish, this is how you do it. A student of mine from last year had been trained as a fisherman by his grandfather, and he had this kind of lore passed on to him, and that is something valuable because it’s so hard to do things that way today.

I want to go back to the title of this piece. When I first read it, I read it as “How To Be a Good Fisherman,” and it wasn’t until I got here that I realized it is “To Be a Good Fisherman.” So it’s almost like a kind of title that would have an ellipsis after it, and each one of the numbered sections would be ways of completing that sentence, even though the actual language of each of those points doesn’t work that way. But it sort of suggests to me an ellipsis. The first point is a general rule about the activity of fishing, about the state of mind you have to be in. Then he goes into the second point as specific instruction about reeling the fish in and about what happens after you get a bite, and then he goes on to talk about kinds of fish and more specific things.

There is so much knowledge underneath all of this, yet it’s as if he is having a conversation with the reader. “And you jerk him,” he says. The conveying of all this information comes without a lot of words. There’s a lot of complexity in thought, in the way he sees the different kinds of fish and the variation within styles of fishing, and it’s not all that straightforward, yet it’s expressed in very few words.

There is precision in the language and in his use of language and in the sparseness with which he gets information across. He’s also very precise in his terminology and the kinds of equipment that go with certain settings. That’s quite impressive for a young child, not only how varied locations are but also how each location calls for different technique and different equipment needs. There’s a solemnity about the tone and a ritual quality to the performing of all these things. You get the impression that it’s about knowledge, about what knowledge is. I get the feeling that he’s pleased that he can show it off – he’s conscious of how much he knows and pleased that he knows so much. I’m struck, too, with the rhythm and pace of this, and it’s very ‘fisherman’ style. I have spent lots of time in Maine, and they say just what they have to say, and if you listen hard enough, you can pick up a lot. It seems to be that there is the style of the fisherman that has to go along with the fishing and the retelling of how you do it. There is a lot of precise language, almost like a poem. The timing and pacing go along with the patience, with everything that happens with fishing.

Let me talk about the genre thing first, how-to books, right? Except it could also be lecture notes, and I can see him being quite the teacher. And if you study how you’re supposed to lecture, you’re supposed to start with defining things, and then you go on from there. He does a lot of that. And the other thing that he does, which they teach you to do in teacher education programs, is task analysis – and he’s very good at that, at breaking it down into every little part, though there are some places where he makes mistakes and forgets parts, but in general he’s very good at remembering every little piece of it.

It says here that this piece was written at home, and that’s interesting. The question arises about whether it was homework assigned at school, like writing directions for something, and if it wasn’t, then who the audience is for this piece, because it is obviously written for a purpose. There’s nothing sketchy about it. It’s a complete work that feels like it was done for someone or for some particular reason. The whole line about having to be patient, particularly given the story before this one about fishing with his grandfather, makes me wonder what he has been told about fishing. Being patient and setting the hook are the two big lessons, hard ones for kids to deal with, and he carries himself here in a certain way as the writer – solid, step by step, clear.

Chair: To summarize this round, I think I’ll start with the posture he takes in this, the style of his writing, and what you have said about this so far. He is taking an instructional stance, and this is like lecture notes. It is the vehicle for letting us know the authority with which he speaks, and he does speak with authority. But never with overbearingness. There are asides like “not that I

know of.” It’s conversational. It’s not stiff. He is familiar enough with what he knows so that he can afford to be that way. And he develops it in a very fascinating way. He starts you off with the essence of fishing, that is, getting the fish. In the very first line, you get the fish. And he tells you how you do that in terms of both the state of mind you need to be in, which is a patient one, a waiting one, and also what you have to do to be sure that fish does not elude you at the last moment. That he does first. And then in a very different sort of way other than that essence, he lets you know that we are talking about a big field of activity that he knows, and he gives you a few examples, which also has the “good teacher” quality. He doesn’t overwhelm you with too much, and he helps you to divide it up – you talk about river fishing; you talk about lake fishing; you don’t mix these things together. The other way he assists himself with that task is to number these. This is to me an astonishing thing, to stay straight in his language. He is a master of ellipsis in the selection power he has in giving us the illustrations and examples, so that compositionally this is superb for his instructional purposes and also superb for somebody who wants to have himself as his own audience and to internalize what he already knows by outlining it. It’s a way of learning that’s being displayed here as well – it’s not everyone’s way of learning – but it strongly suggests that it’s one he can use to very good effect. But I want to pick up on something else that was said. Because of the parsimony of the language, because of the precision and sparseness of it, and because of the modesty of it, it has also a poetic quality, and I think we don’t want to lose sight of that behind the preciseness – that this is a minimalist work, and when we look at some of the other work, that may be interesting to keep in mind. In terms of the stance of the author, words that come up are solemnity, patient, authoritative, solid, step by step, clarity, a lot of control over one’s material, strong authorship. This is somebody “speaking a tradition.” It is passed-on knowledge, drawn from reservoirs of knowledge he has seen in his own experience and that he has also been told by someone else.

Descriptive Round Two

In thinking of all the knowledge he has, I’m thinking of one area in particular: the knowledge of the tools of the craft and the environment. You get the feeling that this child’s been out in nature, in different environments. Also, the texture of the piece and the use of the senses – a lot of feel and touch and handling of the tools, the fish itself, and the taste of it when it gets into the mouth. And in some ways the piece is about relationships with others, his experience with people who do something and do it well. It’s a mental approach to fishing – it’s about fishing as a mental and social process.

I’m fascinated that there are nine parables or proverbs. We have used the phrase *working knowledge*, and we have done some talking about the kinds of things you learn how to do that are narrated by the person who is teaching you, that involve or are immersed in a lot of talk, so I have the feeling that he’s learned this both by being immersed in the activity and by being immersed in the talk of the lore. It has, in fact, a magisterial quality, the quality of a sermon. And I love the image of a seven-year-old saying, “I have fished in lots of lakes and rivers, but the best fishing I have ever had is in a pond in South Carolina.” I can see Hemingway. He has a real feel for being a fisherman.

I like the way he can bring me, as an outsider, into this piece by giving me some very particular information and speaking to me as an outsider – how to set my hook. And if I were ever so lucky to catch a catfish, I would now know what to do. And the part about the fish and mouth, as an outsider. I thought that was purely reverence – this is so important, pay attention. He has this knowledge, and he sort of brings in someone else – I can come into it as an outsider to fishing culture. Then I was interested in some of the verbs he uses: cast, jerk, reel. And the nouns are

about terminology: bobbers, lures, sinkers. But somewhere in those words I hear the poetry of it all; they aren't just words like *throw*. There's a sound to *cast* that is both technical and lyrical.

I just want to say that I know nothing, knew nothing, about fishing, and I studied this story, and I have learned so much about fishing. I just realized that when I was ready to answer this question about lures, because I know now what he means. What he's done, in this magnificent organization, in each these points – listen to this – context, general, river fishing, lake fishing, lure fishing, kinds of fish, cleaning, eating, importance to the writer. That's why that lure fishing hangs together – it's like a chapter in his lecture notes. Yet what I want to say about him in general is that he invites readers into a conversation, that he really is discussing this in general, and that he really invites you to discuss it with him. I kept thinking, why is there a difference between lake and river fishing – because the river is moving, so you need to put a sinker on it, right? To keep it from moving. On a lake, you don't. I never knew that before. The fact that he's organized it like this, that there's such clarity, means that he invites you to have this deep, complex talk with him, so that when I ask why, I can figure it out why from his text and from the way he has described it. The other thing this reminds me of is the John Cage record in which there are long stories and short stories, and the organization is that each story has to take one minute. And when John Cage tells the long story he has to talk fast, and when he tells the short story he talks slowly. It's a wonderful record – “Indeterminacy.” Now when you look at number 7, that's the longest part, and it takes a long part to get through it. I can hear him reading fast. To get to number 8, I think he is savoring this all the way through. Somehow, he is savoring every piece of the directions, like a tasting and a telling. There's also humor in this, as he is watching himself doing all that.

If we think of all the things we said in the reflection about the contemplativeness of the act of fishing and of the setting and the people, there is none of that here. It has a quality of matter-of-factness, and what draws us in is the particularity and detail. There is another piece in the documentary account about damming up creeks, and that's the other side of this kind of technical, specific, deliberative, authoritative piece. There is a reflective side to Matthew's writing, but I'm not sure that the power of contemplativeness is as in evidence here.

This is like a writer who is older, who is bringing someone else into a new territory, who is sharing language, who is imparting knowledge. And there is so much meaningfulness here – like a bridge among generations in this epic of fishing, in its ritualness. There is something about sharing and generosity here. He uses “you” a lot, not “I” – “you put the bobber on.”

Chair: Again, in summary, the writer brings himself into our presence only at the very end of what he has to say, which makes it all the more interesting that the authority he cites and the knowledge are not brought from his person, although we see the solidity of the person behind it because we are looking at it so closely, but his actual self-reference comes only at the very end, and it comes with a statement of value, of importance, of fishing's importance to him, which places it in a not altogether personal realm. This is not a personalized piece, and yet it is not distant. We have noted that it's conversational, inclusive, reaching out to other people and into himself – and then, just at the very end, he says, “and if you want to know how I value this, I do.” He's fished lots of places, and he tells us what he considers to be the very best. There is a quality of dignity there. What we have added to our statements about his stance, along with his authority, are words like *magisterial*. We have brought it into an elaboration of that idea of knowledge as lore that is passed on, with the statement of its being an epic of fishing, having ritual qualities to it, in the telling, and of wisdom. It carries more years in it than he has lived. It is the vehicle for holding memory, so memory enters here in two ways: in the very large realm of memory, lore,

ritual, that is passed on across generations, and you become the holder of the knowledge before you pass it on; and it also has memory in it in the telling of it back to himself in order that he will know what he knows so that he'll be a reliable passer-on of the lore. He's there not so much in the personal sense, but he stands there as the current receiver and passer-on, imparter, and that may have something to do with the dignity of it, the poetic of it, and the reflectiveness of it, although it is also one of his more matter-of-fact pieces of writing. Part of the authority comes from the attention to detail and the precision of language. It is not required that every single thing be said but he lets some thing stand for larger amounts – and that has bits of mastery in it, too. If you read this piece carefully, there's a lot more being said than there are words on the page, and that's powerful writing when you are able to do that. The organization is simply superb, especially to begin with the essence of fishing and to end with its value. That has a loveliness to it. It has as well the sense of a craftsman knowing his tools, and at the same time, right with that, somebody whose approach to things is powerfully intellectual or mental – the teacher is very strong here as well as the fisherman. One last thing about memory: There is the suggestion of seeking memory, of a line back into the “just past,” of the recapturing of summer and other possibilities.

Note: “Descriptive Review of Children’s Works” in *Shared Territory: Understanding Children’s Writing as Works*, by Himley, M. is reprinted by permission of the publisher, Oxford University Press. ©1991 by Oxford University Press. All rights reserved, pp. 202-212.

[7] “Descriptive Review of Works: Guidelines for Describing Visual Works,” adapted from “Made by Hand,” remarks made by Patricia Carini at University of Vermont Workshop with Vermont Writing Project, March 2007

The Descriptive Review of Works starts from the premise that what people make, child or adult, has meaning and importance -- that the work bears the imprint of the maker -- and that these meanings and the maker's hand are visible in the work. A main value of collecting works -- one's own or a child's -- is that embedded in these collections is a story that person's own -- a story embodying a perspective, an aesthetic, a way of seeing and grappling with the world. So often when I have sat down with a former Prospect student eager to see their childhood work, I have been struck with how a collection accrued over a span of years works its magic: bringing back memories of when it was made and how, memories of what else was happening in the classroom, memories of what making the work meant then and what it means now looking back. Not infrequently, the maker, now an adult, sees in these early works the germination of interests or questions or mediums that have persisted across the years.

I also want to emphasize that works can, and often do, offer glimpses of a side of the child that may not be so visible in the intensely social surround of the classroom. I could offer many examples but will content myself with one: a boy, quick-witted and able and also often tempestuous and often caustic. Not what I would call an easy boy. Yet, for all that, when looking at his visual art and written works there is a thread of animals and nature running through in which the viewer glimpses again and again an unexpected softness, warmth of feeling, gentleness and also wonder. It can be of huge importance to see these other sides especially when the dominant picture is well-engrained in the minds of those responsible for the child, so that effectively, the child has been “typed.” Seeing another side, glimpsing a different aspect of the child can have a remarkably freeing effect not only for the viewer but for the child, who perceived in a fresh light, is different in response.

Guidelines for Describing Visual Works

The descriptive review process itself is what I call a constructed conversation -- which means it has procedural guidelines. Although there are procedures, this is a process, not a technique or scripted format. For this reason, it is within limits, adaptable to a variety of circumstances and purposes. For example, for this workshop a logistical decision was made to focus on visual works since a focus on writing, in our experience, would have entailed circulating it in advance, with instructions for reading it. That didn't seem doable or practical. Yet we didn't want to leave writing out altogether. For this reason, to give a flavor of the child's written works, group leaders will read a selection of these aloud, interleaving the written with the visual works, with copies of the writings available so you can read along.

For this Workshop, once the decision to focus on visual art, and the decision to hold the review sessions in 6 small groups were reached, the chairpersons assigned to lead each group, reviewed the 200 or more slides that comprise a subset of the child's total production. From that overview, between 40 and 60 visual images were selected that are broadly reflective of the media, motifs, and themes characteristic of the particular collection. From among these, a focus picture was chosen for close description together with a word for the group to reflect on related to the picture and to the wider array of works (see p. 42). The purpose of the reflection is to create a context for the main task of responding to the focus piece, and following that, to the larger array of work. That is, the reflection is not directly applied to the work but instead serves the purpose of establishing a receptive setting for it. Usually the word chosen for reflection is a medium such as

drawing or collage or a motif such as sun or boat and, less frequently, a larger theme recurrent in the work such as memory or origins or quest.

[Editors' note: A group may be limited in the amount of time available for describing a piece of work. We have participated in fruitful sessions during which we did not reflect on a word before looking together at the focus work.]

With that reflective opening, the review is launched. For these reviews, the next step is to show the focus art work, with the chairperson calling attention to the child's age, to the pseudonym assigned to the child, and other particulars.

I will provide the guiding principles for describing works now. These will be highlighted and further specified as the small group sessions get under way by the chairs for each group:

- To treat the work seriously, not dismissively (e.g., "typical of drawings by 5 year olds")
- To set aside the evaluation baggage of "correctness," maturity, etc.
- To view the work as active – as thought in process – recognizing that it is not definitive and, by the same token, neither is it exhaustible.
- To recognize that description lays out a range of meaning, of possibilities; that it is not intended to be an explanation or to answer the question of why the child drew it or to draw definitive conclusions.
- To let description do its work by not leaping to huge interpretations of the picture, psychological or otherwise.

With this preamble, the chairperson next invites first impressions of the focus work – that is, first takes, what strikes you as the viewer. These are usually gathered up quickly followed by a brief restating of the main content of these impressions.

Following the impressions, the chair introduces the first round of description by distinguishing description from impressions. In brief, when describing I am obligated to ground what I say back to the work itself. For example, I might observe that the most often used color in a painting is orange – and then point to the many places it appears. Or, I might say, there are three main elements in a drawing: what appears to be a dog (or some kind of animal), a child, and a hill – indicating these elements as I speak.

The point of the first rounds of description is a re-telling of the work by attending to the surface content and the elements. The purpose of the re-telling is to establish a secure grounding for later descriptions. In keeping with this aim, it is useful to acknowledge that some elements of a work may be ambiguous and to refrain from giving these definitive names. I illustrated this a moment ago, when I said "what appears to be a dog" and qualified that by saying, "or some kind of animal."

To start the description itself, the chairperson seeks a volunteer, with others in the group following round robin, always with the option to pass.

After the first round or two of this kind of description, the chairperson is listening for the following:

- Connections among the elements: recurrences, symmetries, variations, etc.
- Ambiguities

Compositional and stylistic aspects: the use of space, the rhythm, the aesthetic
Patterns and images arising from the work.

As the description draws to it close, comment is specifically invited to any indications of how the piece was made and to the maker's presence in the work (e.g., choices made, characteristic brush strokes, the presence of wit and humor, a sense of interval, and so on).

After each round of description, the chairperson gathers threads and clusters responses. The final gathering of threads across all the descriptive rounds gives particular attention to the artist's presence in the work.

When the description of the focus artwork concludes, the chairperson for each group will show the larger array of the child's work chronologically, typically from age 4 or 5 to age 13 or 14. While viewing the array, the chair will invite comments on connections with the focus artwork, on continuities and changes in the works, and also any disjunctions or surprises.

A final integration of media, motifs, and themes recurrent in the works and changes observed across the span of works concludes the descriptive process.

Since a purpose of doing these descriptions is exploratory, the chairperson will explain process all along the way. At the close, there is also time specifically allotted for questions and for your responses to the review.

(a way of looking)

To conclude these remarks, I will say a few words about the larger context of values and ideas at the root of the descriptive processes, and how these relate to schools and specifically to schools under siege from an avalanche of standards and tests.

Fundamental to Prospect's philosophy and to the descriptive process is what I will call a way of looking at people, both children and adults. It is a way of looking that honors the complexity and uniqueness of each person. It is a way of looking that strives for as full a picture as possible of that person's way of being in the world, while acknowledging that however full the picture, it will always be partial. It is a way of looking that aims at recognition of each child's and person's capacities and strengths, understanding these to be indispensable for the child's education, including for the negotiation of any hard spots and bumps in the road she may encounter as she grows and learns.

It is a way of looking that doesn't make an easy fit with how children are mostly and increasingly looked at in schools. There is, for example, a strongly engrained habit in schools of focusing on deficiency and at ever earlier ages, a trend exacerbated in recent years by the excesses of testing imposed even on the very young. It is a focus that by scrutinizing isolated behaviors endangers the fuller and complex picture of the child -- the child in process with her life, the child with hopes and dreams, the child with intense passions and a burning desire to learn.

There has been in the past quarter century and more an extraordinary medicalization of the schools. As if in a clinic, children are diagnosed, assigned to a category, and treated -- not infrequently with drugs. Observing is often driven by the search for evidence that will make the case that a child is ADHD or suffers from character disorder, or any of a big bundle of other diagnostic classifications. There are specialist committees that meet to decide the child's

treatment sometimes without with minimal if any opportunity for the teacher to offer her picture of the child. The assumption driving this activity is that it is the teacher's job, the school's job to "fix" the child so she will better fit the school mold. In the process, the child herself is too often lost from view.

The way of looking that is the foundation for Prospect's descriptive processes with its aims at fullness and balance contradicts this trend. The descriptive processes, whatever else they may accomplish, make a space for suspending these habits of snap judgments, classification, and assigning of labels. They make a space for stepping away from a vocabulary of deficiency. Positively, they create a space for discovering a vocabulary particular to a child and a child's work that is both apt and vivid, and so to restore to view the child as she is -- a lively presence, with capacities and strengths to be counted upon.

It is a way of looking that argues with the expectation that children, or people more generally, can be fixed to fit a model or be solved like a puzzle. It is a way of looking that affirms confidence in the capacity of people, children and adults alike, to benefit from the differences among us, each contributing to the whole.

This, it seems to me is terribly important. It is terribly important, especially in these dark times in education, that we, the adults, recognize ourselves as mutually responsible for the well-being of children. By bringing teachers or parents or both together to pool their observations and perspectives, the descriptive processes offer a way to exercise that responsibility of support to children and also to our selves. Meeting together, assisting each other to see each child's value, desire, and need and to take what steps can be taken to create the maximum space for the child's interests to be served is strenuous but refreshing work. It is work that nurtures the spirit, work that is an act of resistance to the rejection of the child, and more importantly, it is a positive and doable act on behalf of the child -- and our selves. A group of teachers or parents meeting regularly to describe children's works builds a strong collaborative structure -- a support for each other as well as for the children.

I have watched this in action for many years. Often these groups are formed and meet across schools. Sometimes teachers within a school form such a group. Right now, I am a member of a group that meets monthly in Bennington that draws teachers from several Vermont locations, western Massachusetts, and neighboring New York State. Several such groups meet on a regular basis in New York City. The Philadelphia Teachers Learning Cooperative has been meeting across schools each Thursday since 1978. I could offer other examples, and it may be that ways of forming such groups will be something we want to talk more about after the descriptive review sessions and over lunch.

What I for certain know is that it is up to us, the elders, to affirm and sustain the young, to not turn our faces away, to be there, sturdy bridges for them to pass across -- and on into their lives.

[8] "Descriptive Review of Children's Works: Guidelines for Describing Written Works," adapted from guidelines for Prospect Fall Conference, 2008 by Patricia Carini, Mary Hebron, and Betsy Wice

These guidelines for the Descriptive Review of Written Works outline a process for looking closely at a child's writing. The overall framework is the same as the framework of describing visual works. "Descriptive Review of Children's Works" from *Shared Territory: Understanding Children's Writing as Works* (pp. 30-36, above), offers the reader participation in a full review of a child's writing.

- reflection on a word (optional, according to purposes and/or time constraints) (p. 42)
- gathering overall impressions (first impressions) of the whole piece
- first round for "retelling" – attending to surface content, elements
- further descriptive rounds
- integrative restatements by the chairperson
- attention to the artist's presence in the work

Reading aloud:

The group reads the piece aloud, in more than one voice. If the writing selected is long, the usual practice is to read it aloud in its entirety, with different readers for different sections. Following the reading of the whole, the usual practice is to gather impressions of the whole but to describe closely only one or more sections.

Overall impressions of the piece:

The chair gathers first impressions of the piece and briefly pulls these impressions together. The chair explains that the next step is to describe the writing – which in practice means to read the selection aloud, sentence by sentence, with descriptive, non-evaluative commentary that proceeds in rounds. It is always an option to pass.

Descriptive rounds:

Descriptive Round 1: Starting from the top, the idea is to read a sentence and then to say what it says to you – not paraphrasing but saying over in your own words what is happening. Each reader can return to passages already read or proceed to the next. The chair may start with a reader who has experience with the process or the chair may take the role of first reader.

Subsequent Rounds: Description can be of longer passages and/or can make connections among passages. As the description unfolds, pulling forward compositional features (sentence length, construction, recurrent phrasing, tempo, etc.) is possible as well as identification of imagery and subtleties of meaning. Following each round, the chair pulls together threads. Time available and the length of the passage described are determining factors in the number of rounds allotted.

Concluding Round: On the strength of what has been described in prior rounds, the final round gives particular attention to the writer's presence in the work (preferences, choices, perspective, hand).

Final integrative restatement:

The chair restates motifs, stylistic elements, imagery, compositional features, themes, across the rounds of description, concluding with the child's presence in the work, **and reminds participants that all descriptive reviews are confidential and discussion of the proceedings is restricted to the group who participated in the review.**

[9] “Reflection on a Keyword ‘World’” by Patricia F. Carini in *Jenny’s Story*, pp. 82-83

Reflecting on a word is quiet, solitary work, each person delving into her memory for phrases, words, and images evoked by the word, writing these down as they come to mind. The point of a reflection is not to winnow or define a word. The point is to uncover some of the richness of layered meaning the word embodies. In the reflection on *world*, my own first response happened to be William Blake’s “The world in a grain of sand.” Later, in the sharing of our responses, another speaker phrased that thought otherwise, with the observation that anything looked at closely – a flower, a leaf, a seed – opens up a world.

The one of us who started the sharing began, though, not with the infinitesimal but with the immensity of the world – and all that it encompasses – and then, in counterpoise, came her own observation that each of us, though living within the immense world, makes worlds of our own. Children make “small worlds” using whatever comes to hand – twigs and leaves and acorns, Legos, and blocks. Teachers create a classroom world. A family makes a home.

The bigness of the world came first, too, to another in the circle, but for this speaker it was from the angle of how it has beckoned humans to explore it – an exploration that chronicles a long human history of discovery of new territories and the mapping of these. As she reminded us, it is a bloody history. Entire populations have been decimated by explorers. Eco-systems have been destroyed.

With variations, there were references by several speakers to the world as contained, bounded by its own circumference, itself a tiny part in an ever-expanding universe. Exploration taken from another slant called attention to the deep, driving human desire to know, to understand the world – and ourselves within it. Myth and science. Diaries, stories, chronicles and histories. Dreamers and inventors and prophets and poets and teachers.

That a book can create a world, a world the reader enters and becomes a part of, added yet another dimension, leading on to how people as makers of traditions, of rituals, of all manner of ideas and belief systems, and things, have told the world over and over again – culturally and historically – changing it and themselves. All of these slants and more were shared, including stories from our own lives.

Looking across the responses, the polarities of the immensity of the world with the infinitesimal, of the physical, geographic world with worlds imagined, of world as bedrock and world as remakable, of the world’s expansiveness and its boundedness are strikingly recurrent, with examples and words chosen by each speaker contributing nuances of meaning.

We let the reflection on *world* settle, to find its place, not as a lens through which to read Jenny or interpret her works, but rather as context shared among us. How *world* figures in Jenny’s thinking and works, and what from our reflection, might make some connection with *her* telling of *world*, we would discover by way of the work itself.

Notes: “Reflection on a Keyword: ‘World’ by Patricia F. Carini in *Jenny’s Story Taking the Long View of the Child*, Carini, P.F., Himley, M., Christine, C., Espinosa, C., and Fournier, J. NY: Teachers College Press © 2010, by Teachers College, Columbia University. Reprinted by permission of the publisher. All rights reserved, pp. 81-82.

Three further examples are: the reflection on the keywords “enough” in *From Another Angle: Children’s Strengths and School Standards*, pp. 36-38, “bring/bringing” in *Inviting Families Into the Classroom: Learning From a Life in Teaching*, pp. 133-134, and “slip,” p.11, in this book.

**THE ART
OF
TEACHING**

[1] “Descriptive Review of Teaching as a ‘Work’ and as an Art Form” by Patricia F. Carini (June 1993)

Session One: Reflection and Description of Work

The chair’s introductory remarks about the focus and components of the review
 Reflection on a word chosen by the teacher ahead of time (see p.42)
 The chair sketches out all of the teacher’s materials
 Description of a Key Work
 Summary and evaluation of the process

Session Two: An Autobiographical Story

The chair offers a brief summary of the first session
 The presenting teacher tells his or her story (prepared ahead of time)
 Questions, comments, dialogue
 Drawing out of issues and implications for teaching
 Summary and evaluation of the process

(Sessions Three and Four are optional)

Purpose: For the teacher, doing this kind of review marks a point in the development of the work (and art) of his or her own teaching. For those participating, and as a contribution to the accruing log of such stories, the review adds dimensions to our knowledge of teaching understood in the context of a ‘work’ and an art.

It may be useful to bear in mind when the teacher and the chair are planning the presentation, that a review of the work (and art) of teaching goes beyond the practice of teaching – that is, this is a step beyond how you do it. Here, the emphasis is more on what that work is; what in the person is being fulfilled through it; what of value is called out in the world through and by teaching; what outside one’s self inspires it; where it fits in the bigger picture of the teacher’s life; where it may connect with other work, avocations, choices appealing to the teacher; what is central or indispensable to the work (and art) of teaching. Yet another way to think about this is that any review of the work of teaching will add to our picture and understanding of the nature of teaching and what that contributes to our humanity and the world – that is, what is given through teaching, where it is given, what is received from it, what is valuable about it.

Planning the Review: When the teacher and chair meet to think through the purposes of this particular review, they might start with the teacher’s current questions and issues, and with these as a center construct the history, autobiographically and in wider terms, as context. Then they might turn their attention to how these questions and issues, lodged in this particular life history, are more broadly related to teaching as a ‘work’ – a calling and an art, always on the way, never arriving. Another way to think of this is that the teacher is selecting dimensions from a large life-work to emphasize, explore, and better understand. These dimensions will not only illuminate that life-work but also contribute to our knowledge of what teaching is and how it develops.

The review happens in two sessions, with a third and fourth, optional. In the first, the emphasis is on ‘works,’ with a reflection on a keyword preceding the description of a selected work. The choice of the keyword may be immediately obvious to the teacher or it may emerge as the chair and teacher talk through the purposes, parts, and shape of the entire review.

The selection of a ‘work’ to be described is made from a spectrum of possibilities. The teacher is responsible for providing the spectrum. The chair is responsible for helping the teacher to lay these out and, later, in the review, for reporting the surrounding works from which the one selected was chosen. The teacher may choose something personally composed that she or he

understands to reflect some important element or slant on the work of teaching as they wish to emphasize and explore it. This might be a piece of finished writing, it might be a journal entry, it might be some other form of documentation such as a scrapbook or photo album, it might be a taped story told by the teacher about a classroom happening important to him or her (or that story written for the occasion), the transcript of a class discussion (or a tape), a video, etc.

If the teacher chooses, the work to be described may not be directly from the classroom, but something made or composed which she or he understands to be importantly related to her or his work more broadly conceived. Equally, a 'work' may be chosen that is not authored by the teacher but which has had large influence on her or his teaching or captures an important idea, one that will shed light on the focus selected for the review. The 'work' might be a poem, an excerpt from an essay or novel, a quotation, an artwork, etc. It is the chair's or teacher's responsibility to distribute any written work to be described in advance of the session, so that participants can become familiar with it beforehand.

At their planning meeting, the chair and teacher select the autobiographical episodes and events through which the teacher will, in the second session of the review, tell the story of the strand of the work chosen for exploration. That will most likely involve a 'telling' by the teacher of the story as it comes, with the chair keeping notes. In the discussion following, it is their task, working together, to select and arrange the episodes that will make the presentation shapely, focused, and understandable. The elements or episodes might include but aren't limited to the following:

- Recollections from childhood or adolescence
- Keywords, key images or key ideas that for this teacher announce the work and art of teaching (see p. 42)
- The debt this teacher's work and art owes to others; that is, where the teacher is connected and finds referent points through other teachers, through books, through ideas, etc.
- Important cultural or world influences on the work and art of teaching recognized by this teacher
- Stories from the work of teaching/from children which illuminate the work; told with context and the connections they make in the teacher's thinking
- Stories from the work of teaching that illustrate for the teacher continuities, changes, growth, loss, culminating moments, and moments of unraveling, beginning again . . .
- Stories from the work of teaching that illustrate threats to it as 'work,' an art form – how these came about, the struggle with adverse circumstances, etc.
- The meaning and implications of the story told, of this autobiography of a work, for the teller.

In the two hour session allotted for the autobiographical component, around 45-50 minutes can be devoted to this presentation. The teacher may bring additional illustrative works to expand on the description of a 'work' made at the previous session.

Part One: Reflection and Description of a Work

The chair introduces the teacher and the note-taker, and convenes the first meeting with a description of the components of the sessions and the number to be held.

Next the chair announces the word for reflection, offering whatever context is appropriate for people's understanding of the choice and describing the reflective process for any newcomers. Following the reflection, the chair clusters and restates the meanings evoked by the word.

The chair then sketches the range of materials from which the teacher chose the 'key' or important work. If it makes sense and time allows, the chair or teacher may want to read or show some of these materials.

The selected work, if it is a written piece, is read aloud, the reader chosen by the teacher: e.g., him- or herself, the chair, a participant, more than one person. If the work is an excerpt, the source is given and, as seems appropriate, a synopsis of the surrounding text.

For either visual or written work, the rest of the procedure is the same as for any Description of Work (see above): impressions; rounds of telling and commenting; periodic integrations of the commentary, etc.).

The session closes with distribution of any material participants may need to read in advance of the second meeting – as context, not for close reading or description within that session.

The note-taker is responsible for writing an integrative summary of the reflection and also the chair's restatements of the description of the work, with primary emphasis on the final summing up.

A total of no more than 12, including the chair, teacher, note-taker, is probably the maximum in terms of the teacher's comfort and the time involved. A group of eight to ten would be ample. Participants are committed to attend both sessions.

Part Two: From the Work of Teaching: An Autobiographical Story

The chair convenes this session with a brief recap of the previous meeting and then describes the parts and order of presentation for the autobiography. This is also the time to remind participants that the teacher's presentation is uninterrupted and that the approximate time allotted to the parts:

Teacher's story	45-50 minutes
Participants' questions, comments, reflections	30 minutes
Drawing the issues and implications for teaching as a work and art form, with teacher and participants contributing	20-30 minutes

The remaining time is for the chair's integrations, discussion of process, critique, etc. The presentation then proceeds according to the outline above. The chair's final summing up integrates the two sessions and restates the implications to be drawn from the review. The note-taker is responsible for collecting a copy of the teacher's presentation notes and adding to it the chair's restatements and integrations from all parts of the review.

Parts Three and Four: Stories Responsive to the Review and/or An Issues Review

The chair convenes the session with a brief recap of the review, with emphasis on the implications and how the review pictures teaching as a work or the dimensions it adds to the picture of that work.

The chair then invites the participants to add miniature stories of their own from the work of teaching that are responsive to the major review through congruence and complementarity or through contrast and counterpoint.

After these stories are collected, the chair offers an integrative restatement and invites discussion and commentary, leading to a further distillation of implications and issues. These stories, extending from and connecting with the larger review, lend fullness and balance.

The note-taker collects any notes participants prepared for their stories and adds to these the chair's restatements and integrations following the stories and following the discussion.

If there is to be a fourth session to review an issue arising from Parts 1-3, the format can be adapted from the format already available for that purpose.

A final reminder: all descriptive reviews are confidential and discussion of the proceedings is restricted to the group who participated in the review.

[2] “A Descriptive Process for Reviewing Activities in the Classroom with Implications for Knowledge-making, Learning, and Curriculum” by Patricia F. Carini (1993)

The chair’s introductory remarks about the focus and components of the review
 The chair provides a brief description of the teacher’s classroom
 The teacher tells the story of the activity
 The chair restates recurrent themes, questions, issues
 Questions, comments, dialogue
 Drawing out issues and implications for teaching
 Summary and evaluation of the process

When this process originated at Prospect Center, it was as a review of curriculum; ‘activities’ wasn’t included in the title. The change in name reflects continuing conversation with teachers in both Phoenix and Mamaroneck that revealed uneasiness and reservations about the language of curriculum. For some of us, the word was freighted with static connotations attributable in part to the well-established practice of pre-determining or mandating a course of study for children. State curriculum guides and the pre-packaged units and texts sold nation-wide by publishers are, we thought, the earmarks of the technologized, ‘object’ status of curriculum. Prescribed as a formula, with kits, workbooks, and texts, the implication is that the ‘unit’ or ‘sequence’ will work anywhere, requiring change only to be updated, as new information on the subject requires. It seemed analogous in principle to an encyclopedia (which supplements the set with yearly additions) and harmonious with the current Information Age image of knowledge.

We also took note that curriculum is typically arranged in sequences, divisible into sub-units, which in turn are correlated with grade level. The underlying premises of linear progression and additive learning are inescapable. So is the lack of attention to learning as a making of knowledge, in which the child (and the teacher) is actively engaged. The idea of a curriculum, invented by external agencies (district and state curriculum departments, textbook manufacturers) and ‘applied’ to children and the classroom seemed to many of us to miss the point of what actually happens in the classroom. Casting aside all other criticism, the picture of a group of children, under the baton of a teacher, marching through a sequence of exercises and duly and all together arriving at a goal predetermined in advance, seemed to us false.

Allowing that picture to stand appeared to us to perpetuate a not helpful myth about education: that learning happens primarily through direct instruction; that all the information rapidly accumulating in our kind of technological society can (and should) be covered; and, for some of us most important of all, that all children learn in the same way and according to the same time table.

Many of us felt that the result of allowing this picture to stand is to set up expectations that can’t be met – and to set up the children and the teacher for frustration and, ultimately, failure. We also took note that the arrangement of curriculum in tidy informational parcels falls in with, indeed is probably inseparable from, assessment instruments which are similarly arranged and focused. Since the hand-in-glove relationship between the testing technology and the curriculum technology is reflected in (and supported by) current proposals for a national curriculum and assessment program, it seems all the more important to challenge the adequacy of the ideas of knowledge, learning, children, and classrooms which legitimize it.

In these discussions, the Prospect language of ‘emergent curriculum’ was brought up. References were also made to the importance of ideas of wholeness, integration, coherence, and meaning for an adequate understanding of learning and ourselves as makers of knowledge. In several of these

conversations, I (Pat) introduced the idea of ‘the questions at the heart of the subject matter disciplines’ as a promising path for us as adults to pursue as we re-think the locating and making of knowledge in the classroom. That notion was woven together with ideas of knowledge as a ‘work’ and with the idea of children’s works in particular as a window to their wonderings about the world and their strong desire to make sense of it and their own experience. Looking at collections of children’s works from that angle seemed, therefore, one way to approach these questions (and the subject matter disciplines). A seminar in Mamaroneck, Children as Makers of Meaning and Knowledge, had advanced along that path. There was also work happening in Friends Select Middle School in Philadelphia (and no doubt in other places) which fit in here, as did a number of child studies spanning multiple years in both Phoenix and Mamaroneck.

What felt central, though, in these conversations is the importance of a vehicle for teachers to talk with each other about what actually happens in the classroom that involves the children in active pursuit of questions, issues, and interests of significance to them and leads to understandings which the teacher believes are educationally important. Telling these stories, painting these pictures for ourselves, would allow the issues raised in this introduction to surface – and others as well. For example:

- Which activities, questions, and ideas are widely inclusive of a broad spectrum of children?
- And closely related, which areas or activities are enter-able from a variety of paths or angles?
- Or, which ideas, questions, and activities are recurrently of interest, promoting depth of understanding and meaning?
- What are the standards arising from the children’s pursuits? How might those standards be made understandable to others?

Telling these stories among ourselves would also allow connections to be made from one teacher to the next – connections which will broaden and deepen our individual perspectives and promote identification of important issues around learning and knowledge-making for further discussion. Telling these stories of classroom activities provides as well the opportunity to develop a vocabulary for communicating to parents, school authorities, and policy makers the ways of learning and knowledge-making in our classrooms that actually happen in terms that will hopefully be both intelligible and interesting. With regard to this latter purpose, these reviews of classroom activities can also be understood as practice sessions in which, working together to articulate our own knowledge, we will gain confidence in that knowledge and in ourselves as communicators of it. The development of our own confidence and convictions will make us stronger spokespersons for – and with – the children of an education that starts from them.

It seems altogether likely and possible that children and adolescents can themselves be involved in the process described below. Experimentation with that would add a valuable documentation of learning, both individual and collective.

For now, the working title of the process emphasizes activity, and positions knowledge-making, learning, and curriculum as implications. However, we also saw the usefulness and possibility of sometimes starting from a mandated slice of curriculum and using the process to explore the activities, questions, and pursuits that bring it to life, make it ‘real’ for the children.

The Purposes of the Review: It seems best to start here since the way I have arranged the parts of the review and the roles of chair, presenting teacher, note-taker, and participants relate to the reasons for doing this kind of review.

Along with the broad purposes referred to in the introduction, this review (like the Descriptive Review of the Child, pp. 10-12, 13-19, the Description of Children's Works, pp. 27-41, Descriptive Review of Practice, pp. 53-55, etc.) offers an opportunity to step back from the active life of the classroom and to gain from distance and reflection a larger, more coherent picture of what is happening there. Like the other reviews, it also presumes that the teacher and the children have been deliberately preserving vestiges of that daily life or allowing them to accumulate. In terms of the activities of the classroom, a teacher or the children may have any of the following materials (but seldom all):

- Scrapbooks of projects or field trips
- Children's works, individual and collective, or photographs or slides
- Class newsletters, charts compiled by children or the teacher that document the activity
- Descriptive reviews of individual children that illuminate children's participation in the activity chosen for the review (e.g., children who are builders, if the activity chosen is construction)
- Teacher notes, journals, or observations; children's journals
- Video-tapes

The review may start from a teacher or the children noticing that a particular activity has been especially engrossing or of long duration or has been frequently returned to or has branched out in interesting ways – or all of these. Equally, it may start from a question in the teacher's mind about what a particular activity means, how productive it is, whether the time it absorbs is justified. Or, a teacher or the children might want to take a close and reflective look at a standard school activity – such as reading or writing or doing math – to explore how it is working, how satisfactory the experience is for the children, what might be changed to make it more invigorating, etc. Or, a group of teachers composed as a study group might want to hear each other talk in turn about a particular activity in order to understand its possibilities for a spectrum of classrooms and for children of different ages.

The review may be centered on a specific question or set of issues, or it may be more broadly based. The review process leaves ample space for the perspectives of participating colleagues, for discussion, and for identification of issues. A teacher may also specifically request recommendations related to the focus of the review as a way to conclude the review.

The purposes for the review, the decisions on the focus and how to shape the telling of the story, and the selection of illustrative materials are topics for a pre-review conversation between the presenting teacher and the chair who will convene and guide the review.

Telling the Story of the Activity: It will fall to the chair to introduce the review. She or he will tell the participants what they are going to hear about and the purposes of the review. For example:

“What you are going to hear is the story of how, over a period of years, construction activities have happened and evolved in a classroom for young children. The purpose for this review is broad: to identify the important educational issues, values, and standards, which are highlighted by this activity and the telling of it. In addition, the teacher would like your thoughts on where this activity may connect with things happening in your classrooms and also any suggestions for ways to expand or deepen what is now happening with the children. The story draws on a number of sources, many of which will be used to illustrate or expand on it. These include photographs of children constructing things, children's works (both individual collections and collective projects), and teacher observations and notes. The teacher will also refer to reviews she has previously done of individual children.”

Continuing, the chair sketches the plan for the review, which will always include some description (perhaps illustrated with photos or charts or slides) of the broad dimensions of the classroom: the number of children, how they are grouped (multi-age, single grade, etc.), the flow of the day, the activities and areas available, etc. This is brief, intended merely to locate the listeners and contextualize the specific activity to be reviewed. When the teacher reaches the activity that is the subject of the review, she or he can offer more detail. This is often where some pictures or slides of the activity area can be helpful.

The other elements of the teacher's story have many options and may include any, but probably not all, of the following. Naturally other dimensions can be substituted as they arise and seem important to the telling of the particular story.

- Reflections on a keyword associated with the activity (see p. 42)
- Connections of the activity with the teacher's own life and thinking; for example, a poem that captures the essence; her or his own childhood or adolescent experiences with the activity, etc.
- An historical perspective on the activity as it has evolved in practice; these can usually be told as discrete episodes which makes them of do-able length and is usually adequate to set the scene
- The place of the activity in the classroom now; this may include two or three stories or incidents that give the flavor and feel of how the activity proceeds
- What made the activity central for the teacher – brought it to her or his attention; within that, what she or he noticed, listened for, and perhaps kept track of, and also what his or her role as teacher has been
- Examples, episodes, telling moments; participation of individual children and groups of children, including the whole class; this tends to be the heart of the matter, and selecting this material and arranging it for flow and point is important
- What the teacher has learned; questions and issues on her or his mind

The order in which these options are presented offers a generic plan, but the actual content of the review, the teacher's purposes, the supporting material available are what makes it come to life.

After the chair sketches the plan for the teacher's presentation, the teacher without interruption tells the story. In a review lasting two hours, the teacher's presentation is about 50 minutes. In an hour and a half review, the presentation is about 40 minutes.

Chair's Restatement and Integration: The chair listens, as in other reviews, for recurrent themes, questions, and issues; for connections; and for highlighting incidents and examples. The restatement serves the purpose of focusing the story but isn't a summary or condensation or re-saying of what the teacher just said. It is brief rather than comprehensive, offering the other participants a sketch of connections and counterpoints within the story that seemed of special importance from the chair's perspective. In a recent review, the chair's restatement selected for comment the following:

- the teacher's role and standards
- a blurring of subject matter boundaries as a consequence of the activity
- the children's standards and the modes of thinking illustrated through their explorations
- challenges the teacher's review posed to some commonly held beliefs about learning

The restatement leads directly to the invitation to participants to comment, to ask questions, to offer their perspectives.

Participants' Comments/Questions/Perspectives and the Discussion: The remainder of the review (as much as an hour, not less than a half hour) is devoted to comments, questions, and discussion. As the discussion proceeds, it is important for the chair to make room for all participants to speak and, at intervals, to sum up the gist of the discussion around a particular question or issue. If the teacher has requested recommendations, the chair reminds the participants of the focus for those recommendations and leaves time following the discussion for these to be offered.

Implications and Connections: At the close of the discussion (or following the recommendations), the chair asks the group, including the teacher, to draw implications for knowledge-making, learning, and curriculum, making sure that everyone has the chance to contribute. In this context, or separately, the chair can also ask for articulation of issues that this particular review highlights and/or connections it makes with inquiries, documentations, or reviews that others in the group are pursuing.

This concludes the review, except for comment to the process or other critique and, if it is part of a series, decisions about the upcoming reviews.

Reminder: The note-taker, like the chair and the presenting teacher, is selected in advance of the session. Collecting a copy of the teacher's presentation notes or text and, as seems useful, copies of illustrative material is a major part of the note-taker's responsibility. The note-taker also keeps a record of the chair's restatements of the teacher's presentation and of the questions and discussion as well as any recommendations and implications and connections identified at the close of the review.

A final reminder: all descriptive reviews are confidential and discussion of the proceedings is restricted to the group who participated in the review.

Note: To read more about the emergent curriculum, see Schwartz, E. (1992). "The round table: Emergent curriculum in a primary class." In *Students teaching, teachers learning*, (N.A. Branscomb, D. Goswami, & J.Schwartz, Eds., pp. 22-41). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

[3] “Descriptive Review of Practice,” adapted by Rhoda Kanevsky and Lynne Strieb for this book

Chair introduces the framing question and purpose, describes the components of the review and any background necessary to understand the teacher’s setting. The chair emphasizes confidentiality.
 Optional Reflection on a key word (time permitting) (see p. 42)
 Chair restates the focusing question.
 Teacher presents her uninterrupted presentation based on some of the elements listed below. Teacher provides floor plan and typical schedule.
 Teacher’s colleagues add relevant information if possible.
 The chair gathers main threads after the teacher’s presentation.
 Chair invites comments and questions.
 Chair gathers main themes from the discussion; restates focus/framing question
 Participants respond with comments and suggestions.
 Chair summarizes.
 Chair invites evaluation of the process
 Chair restates necessity of confidentiality.

Purpose: The primary purpose of this Descriptive Review of Practice is to offer the teacher an opportunity to describe and reflect on her current work within the context of her personal history, her early visions and goals for herself, and the possible constraints she faces in fulfilling these goals in her current setting. It may be used by inquiry groups to fit into a two-hour time frame. Because the Descriptive Review of Practice occurs in a collaborative setting which offers multiple perspectives on her work, she may uncover new ways of fulfilling the visions of teaching that inspired her to be a teacher in the first place,

A teacher may have a particular concern about her practice and may use this process to address that concern.

For the participants, a Descriptive Review of Practice will add to their understanding of the nature of teaching, what in the person is being fulfilled, and what is central and indispensable to the work of teaching.

Preparing for the Review: The shape and procedure for the Review of Practice is designed anew for each occasion through a conversation between the teacher and the person who will chair the review. Since the formulation of the framing question is key to other procedural decisions, time taken to arrive at a satisfactory formulation of that issue is time well spent. Two conversations between the teacher and the chairperson may be needed to arrive at a well-organized plan for the review.

The review is intended to be limited to approximately 2 hours. Usually the teacher’s presentation takes about an hour; another hour is needed for questions, discussion, comments, and suggestions. Although a reflection on a key word is may be helpful, time will be a consideration.

The Presentation Includes:

1. The teacher begins her presentation with the following information: how teaching was chosen as a work; important influences (positive and negative) on the teacher’s philosophy, practice, and personal growth; values or thought important to one’s self from its sources in childhood or adolescence.

2. The teacher describes her practice. The headings listed below are suggestions from which a teacher might make a selection. Educators in other settings could adapt these suggestions to apply to their particular professional functions:
- the teacher's hopes and expectations for the children
 - the shape and rhythm of the work of teaching on a daily, weekly, quarterly basis
 - the materials and classroom activities at the center of the teacher's practice the teacher's understanding of how a curriculum evolves
 - how the teacher gets to know the children; how the teacher sees him or herself in relation to the children; how the teacher envisions the children's relationships to each other
 - how the teacher reflects on teaching; who and what offers support for their process
 - those aspects of practice which are a) most satisfying, b) more challenging, c) most frustrating
 - those aspects of practice which are a) most reliable, b) least developed, c) on the edge of thought
 - the teacher's aspirations; and also, the teacher's sense of the gap between those aspirations and actual practice; the factors that prevent closing that gap and the supports that would facilitate achieving those aims
 - the values the teacher understands to be at the root of practice and the standards applied to practice

(These are merely suggestions. The teacher and the chair are to be free to devise their own headings.)

3. A description of material/artifacts associated with the work of teaching
4. An observation or commentary on practice presented by a colleague, if possible; that person's sense of the teacher's stance, relationships, interests, standards, etc.
5. An outline of current duties and of previous employment; these are often listed by the chair to relieve the teacher of the burden
6. Questions and ideas, and/or thinkers and other practitioners that spark the teacher's imagination
7. Interests apart from teaching which are fulfilling; other vocations attractive to the teacher now or in the past

The Role of the Chair

The chairperson convenes the review, describes the plan. The chair assigns a note-taker to record the summaries and participants' comments and suggestions.

The chair announces all major transitions within the presentation, inserts summaries as needed, and follows the presentation with an integrative statement connecting the parts.

The chair invites questions and discussions from the participants, summarizing that discussion as needed. After a re-statement of the focus for the review, the chair requests the participants' comments and suggestions.

The chair may summarize the suggestions. The chair emphasizes confidentiality. The teacher may comment on her experience of preparing and presenting the review.

The teacher may make a tape recording of the session for her future reference.

[4] “Descriptive Review of an Issue” by Patricia F. Carini (April 1991)

The chair’s introductory remarks about the focus of the review
 Reflection on a keyword or Recollections by participants (optional) (see p. 42)
 Participants present examples (e.g., portrayal of child using headings from the Descriptive Review of the Child)
 Questions, comments, dialogue
 Drawing out implications and connections
 Summary and evaluation of the process

The decision to review an issue is quite often in response to a Descriptive Review of a Child (see pp.10-12, 13-19) which raises a topic, value, or standard that has broad interest or implication (e.g., active children who find the school setting restrictive). Alternatively, a group of teachers (and parents) may elect to use the process to explore an issue around which there is confusion, common concern, or a difference of opinion (e.g., grade level standards and promotion policy).

An Issues Review usually takes about two hours. However, a big or complicated issue may evolve into a series of reviews, each taking a different slant on the topic. For example, a first session might involve a reflection on a word closely associated with the issue, with the aim of discovering the dimension of its meanings and of establishing common ground among the participants. Similar purposes are often served by the participants’ recollections of their own experience with the issue (e.g., being held back in school or sitting still for long periods of time). An issue like ‘school standards’ might be looked at through different lenses: children’s standards for themselves, teachers’ standards, parents’ standards, state standards, standards for school success, standards for behavior, etc.

The approach used in the review is to explore the issue by describing it. The aim of the description is to use specific and well-developed examples to cast light on the issue and to move the dialogue away from generalities. The examples are portrayals of children according to all or some of the headings of the Descriptive Review of the Child. The children portrayed are chosen for the reason that their school lives and experience bear closely on the issue. The description might include one full portrayal of a child followed by two or three briefer ones. The full portrayal provides depth; the briefer ones expand the spectrum.

Since the ‘description via example’ establishes the context for dialogue, the examples presented are restated by the chair according to convergences, divergences, and complementarities among the portrayals. The chair often asks other participants to contribute to this restatement, including the addition of children called to mind by those portrayed.

A focusing question for a review may be decided upon and announced in advance. For example: how can our classrooms and practice be more responsive to the interests and needs of children who stand out as different? Alternately, the purpose of the issues review may be exploratory: to map the parameters, to make visible, to find common ground. In these circumstances, the exploration may yield a question or focus to be pursued in a second session or at a later date. If there is a focusing question, the review dialogue culminates with recommendations. If the review is exploratory, the chair makes a closing integrative statement.

Notes of Issues Reviews are composed from presenters’ notes for portrayals, the chairs’ integrative restatements, and recommendations, if any.

Key roles in the Issues Review are played by the chair, the teachers (and parents) presenting examples, and the note-taker. As in all reviews, the chair and the teachers (and parents) responsible for examples meet in advance to shape the review. This involves phrasing the issue and purpose of the review, deciding the focusing question (if any), anticipating the probability of follow-up sessions, developing the portrayals, and assigning the order of presentation. The note-taker is responsible for collecting teachers' (and parents') write-ups and for transcribing the chair's integration from notes taken during the session.

The time allotted for the examples (portrayals) is usually about an hour: the full portrayal employing all the descriptive review headings takes up to 30 minutes; briefer portrayals, beginning with physical presence and gesture, with other headings used selectively, take between 10-15 minutes. These portrayals (full and brief) are tailored to include examples, or observations that point to and illuminate the issue being explored. The chair's restatements, dialogue among the participants in the review, recommendations, and the evaluation of process tend to take another hour. When several sessions are scheduled around a particular issue, sessions in which there are reflections or recollections may be shorter (45 minutes to 1½ hours).

All participants in an Issues Review are listening to the examples/portrayals, reflections, and recollections for how these resonate with their own experience, for the perspectives they offer, for the children they call to mind, for the response they suggest or ask for. The dialogue is composed from these responses, with periodic integration or refocusing by the chair. Any culminating recommendations are from the group to itself and are not directed back specifically to presenting teachers (and parents).

[5] “Recollecting: Purposes and Process,” by Patricia F. Carini

Recollecting as a taproot to story and memory is woven through Prospect’s philosophy and processes. Understood as a democratizing and humanizing force, story is a recurring theme in Prospect books and essays. In the introduction to *Starting Strong* (Teachers College Press, 2001), story, and its “animating power,” is touchstone to humanness itself:

I rely on the animating power of story to connect your story with mine, and both of ours to larger public stories, stories of the era, stories of the race, stories of loss and sorrow, stories of hope and fulfillment, stories of human degradation and destructiveness, stories of human strength in the overcoming of stunning blows of fate; in sum, stories of how humanness happens in the making, unmaking, and remaking of it. (p. 2)

A Descriptive Review of the Child (see pp. 10 -12, 13-19) or a Child’s Works (see pp. 27- 41) may have bearing on a big idea (e.g., justice) or a phase of life (e.g., infancy) or on such human capacities as memory or imagination or play or learning or making art. Past Prospect conferences or institutes have often hinged on complex themes such as the human capacity for valuing, or the struggle for an education that recognizes and supports every child’s capacities. For any of these occasions, recollection is a usual starting place, for when we take time to recall and share experiences that had a shaping effect on our own learning (or that helped shape our ways of seeing the world, or that connected us with values that widened our horizons), when we recall and share play that absorbed us in childhood, our perceptions of these inherently human experiences, attune us to their meaning in children’s lives. Our capacities for observation are honed and expanded.

The process for convening a Recollection as a constructed conversation, like other Prospect processes, is governed by guidelines intended to ensure that all participating can be assured of respect, and that their stories will be held in strictest confidence. The guidelines for a Recollection that initiated the 2008 Fall Conference can serve as an example. The theme for the conference as a whole was “Attending to Now: Imagining Ahead.”

Prior to the conference, the following guideline for preparing a recollection was sent to registrants.

Guidelines for Preparing a Recollection (Fall Conference 2008):

On being seen, and seeing yourself, from a fresh perspective or in a new light

Following the opening session of the Conference, we gather in small Working Groups. The first meeting is a chance for new and returning participants to mingle and become acquainted within a small circle. This is also the session in which we ground ourselves in the ideas framing the conference. To do that grounding, each of us will share a recollection of **how someone (or a set of circumstances) gave us a new awareness of capacities, gifts, or possibilities we had not previously recognized – with particular attention to how that insight proved sustaining across time.**

Maybe the new perception inspired confidence. Maybe it allowed you to be more fully who you are. Maybe it flung open a door to a future previously unimagined. It may have been an earthshaking experience at the time, or its importance may have been felt slowly as a kind of unfolding or as a memory recalled when needed. It may have been a large-scale event in your

life, or it may have happened on a smaller scale (though not for that reason of less value). The story you tell can be from childhood or adolescence or adult life.

The first step in preparing the recollection is to meditate on times when you saw yourself in a new light. What occasioned that perception? Was it circumstances? Was it something someone said? Was it someone's expression of trust in you (either in words or in expectations)? While meditating on memories that come to mind, it is helpful to jot down notes and to notice how occasions that come to mind, perhaps from different points in your life, may be interrelated. Keep in mind, too, that the events and the insights need not be monumental. Fresh perceptions that inspire and sustain are not lesser because they are on the scale of daily life happenings.

The second step is to choose from among these memories the recollection you are going to share. There are a couple of things to keep in mind when making that selection. **First, it should be a story you can tell in 6 or 7 minutes** so there will be time to hear each person's recollection without rushing those who go last. **Second**, although the chairperson convening the group will emphasize the **confidentiality** of the stories and the rule that no story is to be repeated outside the group except by the person whose story it is, **be sure to select a story you are comfortable telling in a small group.**

It is helpful when crafting your story (and telling it), if you can include some of the following points:

- How you selected the recollection you are going to share and why;;
- The setting of the story: location, time frame, how old you were and who was involved, or what circumstances were in play;
- What happened or was said or was put in your path? What was its immediate impact? What did it mean to you then? How has it sustained and influenced you across time? How may it have created opportunities that might otherwise have been missed? What does it mean to you now looking back? What does it make you think about?

* * * * *

Though particulars will vary, these basic guidelines are useful for preparation of a recollection on any of a variety of topics. For example, for the 2009 Fall Conference, the Recollection was of a child (or group of children) who enlarged/deepened perception of the child, or group of children, or childhood itself. Except for the change in focus, the preparation of the Recollections conforms to the outline above. The same is true for the previous Recollection on our own passage from childhood to adolescence suggested in "Descriptive Review of the Child: Observing and Describing Babies and Adolescents (pp. 20-24), for their power to attune and deepen observation of adolescents: a compelling interest, perhaps newly discovered early or later in adolescence; learning experiences, in or out of school, that made a difference in how we saw ourselves; personal aspirations and/or yearnings for wider horizons, for something beyond our own lives. The variation from the 2008 Fall Conference guidelines (above) is that the recollection is to be from adolescence rather than from any phase of life. Examples of issues and ideas as focus for a Recollection can be multiplied many times over. What remains a constant, with minor variations, are the guides for preparing it.

Meeting to Gather Recollections

The Chairperson is primary for ensuring safety, confidentiality, and respect. Recollective groups are of necessity small, with a recommended number of no more than 8. Too large a group

pinches the time allotted to each person to tell a story. Of equal importance, too large a group can be intimidating to those new to the process. It isn't usual or comfortable to tell a personal story to a crowd, and especially so, if many are strangers.

Following introductions, the Chairperson reviews the guidelines sent in advance with attention to the theme of the stories that will be told and the expectation that hearing stories on the same theme told from each teller's perspective will widen and deepen its meaning. The Chair reiterates the confidentiality rule: that the only person who has permission to retell or discuss a story told is the person who told it in the first place. With that single exception, all stories are to remain within the group privileged to hear them.

The Chair explains that the story telling begins with a volunteer in the expectation that the first story will invite another, followed by yet another, until all the stories are told. The stories are heard seriatim without comment, questions, or cross-talk. To ensure that all tellers have equal time for their stories, it is usual to assign a time-keeper to keep the session on track.

The Chair encourages participants to keep notes of recurring themes and also complementarities and divergences among the stories.

When all the stories are told, the Chairperson draws forward main themes, with attention to points of convergence and divergence, and invites participants to join in this process. Following this pulling together, and as time permits, participants are invited to comment to what the session makes them think about. The session closes with a final reminder from the Chair of the confidentiality of the stories told.

The Moving Power of Story

It is moving to hear stories that all bear on a common experience. The differences and complementarities give voice to the diversity of our humanness and to our common human ground. We are all story weavers and tellers. We all recognize the sustaining and healing and hurting power of story. To appropriate or tell someone else's story -- to claim another's experience as one's own -- is a gross betrayal of trust. To hear another's story with open heart and mind, to receive it as a gift, uplifts both teller and the one honored to hear it. To hear one story is to be reminded of others, a spiraling of stories spinning across centuries, and through them, to catch glimpses of the complexities, time immemorial, of living a human life. Story, as suggested earlier (*Starting Strong*, 2001), is "weighted in two directions, [serving] a pluralizing and publicizing [democratizing] function and equally [the] twinned function of connecting both teller and hearer with personal memory and an innerness threatened on all sides by memory's (and history's) eclipse." (ibid., p. 2)

[6] “Format for Close Reading Documents, Texts, Etc.” by Patricia F. Carini (May 1996)

Close reading is the polar opposite of debating a text or offering opinions about it. The aim is to stay as close as possible to the text itself. The yield is an unlayering of meanings, with attention to ambiguities as interesting and important in their own right. Understandings of the text are usually both heightened and deepened. In these ways it is precisely parallel with a description of any work – visual art works, constructions, writings, drawings, etc.

Close reading a text is a variation on the process used for describing children’s works. The process can be applied to any text (poetry, essays, etc.) or a set of notes. Notes that are transcribed into complete sentences and narrative form, and are printed, are preferred. Close reading is slow, intensive work. Struggling to decipher handwriting or the sense of a statement makes that work even slower. Further, the more a reader has to guess or fill in, the less confidence there is in any understandings that arise from the reading.

Texts or notes that are going to be studied intensively are usually distributed in advance of the close reading session, with the instruction to read and annotate the material (that is, what stands out, questions, etc.).

The session requires a chair and note-taker(s). The chair makes certain decisions in advance, such as: a word for reflection; a plan for selecting a ‘starting place’ passage (if the text/notes are lengthy); a procedure for gathering several rounds of description.

The optimal number of participants in a close reading is six through eight. A smaller number can work very well – even as few as four. A larger number can be cumbersome, but a group of ten can manage if the reading is disciplined.

(1) A close reading usually begins with a reflection on a word announced by the chair. The procedure here is the same as for all reflective conversations: each participant writes down the words, images, phrases the word calls to mind. The chair has each person read what he or she wrote. The chair pulls together the main themes and spanning the word and the polarities that give it dimension (see p. 42).

(2) Second, the chair invites ‘first impressions’ to the document to be described. These are gathered and pulled together in the same manner as the reflection.

(3) If the document or notes to be described are lengthy, the third step is to have participants identify and read aloud passages that are particularly meaningful to them, commenting as they do so about what makes the passage important to them. The chair may then elect to pull this reading of passages together or move on to a selection of a ‘starting point’ passage. The passage is often obvious for the reason that several persons chose it. Sometimes more deliberation is needed.

(4) Describing the ‘starting point’ passage illustrates what a close reading is. The chair typically asks someone to read the passage aloud. This can be followed by a second person reading the same passage aloud so that it is heard in more than one voice. After the read aloud, the chair asks for a volunteer to start a line-by-line reading and description. The volunteer reads the line and then comments or retells it.

The following complex sentence in “Malcolm X and Black Rage” in Cornel West’s *Race Matters* (1992) can serve to illustrate how a line-by-line reading and description proceeds:

I use the term 'jazz' here not so much as a term for a musical art form, as for a mode of being in the world, an improvisational mode of protean, fluid, and flexible dispositions toward reality suspicious of 'either/or' view points, dogmatic pronouncements, or supremacist ideologies" (p.105).

After reading the sentence aloud, the first describer might observe that it is a very long sentence, and perhaps go on to say that what stands out to her is that it speaks to flexibility in several ways: the use of the word *flexible* itself, preceded by *improvisational* and followed by rejection of binary, dogmatic, or supremacist ideological conclusions or premises.

The second describer might choose to stay with the first part of the sentence for a closer look -- perhaps pointing out that West tells the reader he has chosen the word *jazz* not for its meaning in music but for the light it can cast on a 'mode of being in the world.' Wondering what a 'jazz mode of being' might be, the describer might return to the words *flexible* and *improvisational* to anticipate that 'a jazz mode of being' suggests departure from traditional forms.

The third describer might pick up from there, pointing out that West defines the mode exactly that way, as improvisational but also as generative (*protean*) and characterized by flow or fluidity as well as flexibility. Describing these as 'dispositions' suggests an inclination, something carried deep inside a person, to see things in a certain way, from a particular slant -- that is, to be poised for flexible action in a way not unlike a dancer.

The fourth describer might continue by commenting to the whole of this sentence or by going onto the next.

It is important to note that at any point a describer is free to return to an earlier sentence or passage.

The chair (and the group) has choices to make following the close reading of the first passage. They include the following:

- To close read another important passage and possibly several more
- To use the passage as an arrow to the entire document/text/set of notes. If this is the choice, then following the chair's integration, participants are asked to comment in relation to their annotations of the text as a whole: sentences or passages that they see as closely connected, the implications of the passage in the context of the whole, polar or dichotomous passages, etc.
- To start the text from the beginning, close reading line-by-line for one or more passages, with the option of moving to paragraph-by-paragraph as the text opens up.

The choices depend on purpose, on the density of the text, and on the time available. If there are many texts or notes to be covered as part of an encompassing inquiry, for example, it may be preferable to select one or two passages or chunks from each for line-by-line reading, to be followed by commentary on the whole of each text or set of notes.

At any point in a close reading that commentary bogs down or that retellings are frequently not understood in the group, it can be taken as an indication that more line-by-line reading and describing is needed.

The task of keeping notes is rotated throughout the close reading session. The note-taker for the chair's integration of the reflection is followed by a note-taker for the chair's gathering up of first impressions. That note-taker may continue through the first round of description and be succeeded by a note-taker for the rest of the description, including the chair's final integration, and so on.

Note-takers record the following:

- Initial note-taker: Name of the session; chair and note-taker; participants; date of the session plus chair's integrative restatement(s) for the reflection and possibly the first impressions.
- All note-takers: Chair's integrative restatements; implications or recommendations that may be drawn from the reading. These are to be transcribed following the session and circulated in print.
- Final note-taker: In addition to the integrative restatements/implications, the final note-taker records the date of the next session (if any) and also the name of the chair for that session.

Either the initial or final note-taker assumes responsibility for collating all the notes for the session. Each note-taker is to turn in her or his notes in narrative form, preferably in print, by a stated date to the designated note-taker.

Note: See "Introduction," (pp. 8-9) in *Inviting Families into the Classroom* for a discussion of "Format for Close Reading Documents, Texts, Etc."

THE CLASSROOM AND SCHOOL

[1] **“Gathering Teacher Stories from the Classroom” by Patricia F. Carini (August 1997)**

- The chair introduces the session
- The teacher who prepared a story ahead of time tells his or her story
- Response to the story by the group
- Participants are invited to tell stories until everyone has had a chance to speak
- Drawing out implications and themes
- Reflection on a word or theme that has surfaced (optional) (see p.42)
- Summary and evaluation of the process

Story gathering, like other of the descriptive processes, includes the opportunity for everyone present to speak and also the option to pass. Stories are heard attentively, seriously, and respectfully. Stories told are not re-told in other settings than the forum in which it was first told, except by the original teller. Confidentiality is the rule. There is a chair to keep the session on track.

For this kind of story gathering session, one teacher comes with a prepared-in-advance story of a meaty event or observation from the classroom. This lead story is to include context, what happened, how it caught the teacher’s attention (i.e., what made it seem important, interesting, etc.), and any question it may raise for her or him. The story can be written, but it isn’t necessary to do so.

After the first story – and any responses to it – then another story, not necessarily related in any obvious way to the first, is told. The storytelling proceeds in this fashion, one story inviting another, until every participant has had the opportunity to speak. At intervals, and at her discretion, the chair gathers up threads from the stories.

Although there is no instruction to tell stories and observations that are connected to a particular theme, it is my experience that more often than not, the stories tend to flow along, forming a broad stream but one that recognizably has its source in the starting story. To me, one of the intriguing things about this kind of session is how in ways, not all obvious or predictable, stories branch off from each other and later rejoin and how questions or issues sparked by one story are responded to by another.

After the stories are told, the chair, with the help of the group, draws out themes and implications. I have had the experience a couple of times that it seemed ‘right’ to end the session with a reflection on some word or theme that the stories surfaced.

Notes are of the chair’s restatements.

A final reminder: all descriptive reviews are confidential and discussion of the proceedings is restricted to the group who participated in the review.

[2] “The Descriptive Review as a Lens to the Classroom” by Cecelia Traugh (adapted from Fall Conference talks, 1994 and 1995)

The chair convenes the meeting and frames the review (e.g., one framing question might be, “In the classroom, do we do what we say we do and what we say we value?”)

Reflection on a theme or word selected by the teacher and related to a value or to some thread running through the presentation (optional) (see p. 42)

The chair states a more specific framing question

The teacher briefly provides a ‘value context’ for his or her classroom (i.e., what values he or she wishes the classroom to reflect and foster)

The teacher describes the classroom according to space, materials, time (brief)

The teacher describes her or his classroom, adapting the headings of the Descriptive Review of the Child and speaking without interruption for about 45 minutes

The chair pulls together main threads, images, and motifs

Participants raise questions and offer comments and suggestions

The group evaluates the process (e.g., Was the teacher’s work respected? Did the discussion grapple with hard, important issues? Did the teacher feel his or her questions were addressed? Did participants find themselves asking questions of their own classrooms? What worked especially well? What would strengthen the process?)

(Note: this is the version developed by the Mamaroneck Saturday Study Group based on Cecelia’s talk)

My aim in this introductory presentation is to provide both some jumping off points and some context for the week we will be doing on our theme of Creating Collaborative Working Groups in Schools. I will begin this creation of context by placing collaboration in the frame of a large idea and set of values – that is, holding persons at the center of education and schools and creating schools and classrooms that allow children and adolescents and adults to gain a sense of who they are as persons and that better support their being recognized as persons.

One way many of us in this room have to place children and adolescents at the center of our attention and work is through the Descriptive Review of the Child process (see pp. 10-12, 13-19). As it stands, the descriptive review is a strong statement of values about the fullness of who we are as human beings. What I am going to do this morning is to suggest that the headings and the questions within those headings can be used as guides or questions to ask of classrooms and schools. The values that guide our descriptions of children can also set standards for looking at the space provided for and the opportunities offered to children.

I begin with physical presence and gesture. This aspect of the review contains material such as, What are the child’s characteristic gestures and expressions? How are those visible in the child’s face, hands, and body? How do those expressions and gestures vary and in response to what circumstances? How would you describe a child’s energy, rhythm, pace? How does it vary? What is the child’s voice like? What are its rhythms, expressiveness, inflections?

If each of us were to do a description of one child, we would create a room full of children that would be striking in its variety. Then, if we thought about all these children being in the same room and school, the question would become, how do we create classrooms that have room for this variety of stance?

- How would we create room for the child who needs to move or whose gestures are large?

- How would we create room for the child who must talk everything through – out loud?
- How would we create room for the child who is silent/quiet/more internal and who in his or her quietness can be seen as disconnected?
- How would we create room for the child who takes the observational stance alongside the child who leaps right in?
- How do we take this variety seriously instead of pretending it doesn't exist or is not important?

Making room here requires our acknowledging that these differences are part of the person, are important, and require our creating structures which enable their reasonable expression. This means helping children both to acknowledge these differences in others and to learn to use their own qualities to contribute to the good of the larger whole.

Focus questions for a school's staff for looking at how teachers and schools make room for physical variety might be: How are we working to accommodate the physical variety in our classrooms? What are the issues that continue to raise questions? What is our stance on the use of Ritalin?

The aspect of the descriptive review entitled disposition and temperament asks us to consider the following: How would you describe the child's characteristic temperament and its range? How does the child express feelings? How do you 'read' the child's feelings? Where and how are they visible? How would you describe the child's emotional tone?

Thinking about the child-centered classroom, the basic questions for a school staff become:

- How is room given for the expression of feeling?
- Is feeling acknowledged as legitimately part of the person and so of the school and classroom?
- How do we work to help children learn to appropriately express anger? How do we make this a subject of discussion and work?
- How do we incorporate the arts into our classrooms? What is the role of poetry in the school?

When we think about connections with others, we think about how the child goes about making a place for him- or herself in a group, about his or her role within friendships and small and large groups, about his or her response when difficulties arise, and about his or her way of connecting with or avoiding adults.

There are many questions that we can ask in relation to this aspect of classroom and school life:

- What is the room for friendship in the classroom? Are friends separated when placed?
- Can friendships and other social relationships be the subject of individual and group conversations in the classroom or brought in through literature study?
- What structures are there for children to learn how to recognize each other – their work, their contributions, their growth?
- What thought is given and action taken to assure the social safety of all children in a room or a school?

- How much variety is there in the interactions and relationships possible for children and adults in the classroom?
- How do we think about and work on the relationship of the individual to the group?
- How do we support interdependent relationships?

I have combined strong interests and preferences and modes of thinking and learning into one heading. In the Descriptive Review of the Child, we look at: What are the things the child really likes and dislikes? What questions, wonderings, or curiosities stir the child's mind and imagination? Which recur and persist? How are these interests expressed? What is the child most likely to do given a choice and plenty of time? What seems to be most satisfying and fulfilling about these activities and interests? What makes them 'go right' and what spoils them? What rules govern them? For what idea or media does the child have an inner sense or feel? What does the child do with great ease? How does the child gain a firm understanding or internalization of knowledge? How is the child inclined to figure things out?

Making room for these aspects of a child is about many things:

- What is the work that children do in our classrooms and in the school as a whole? What opportunities for making, building, and talking do children have? How central is this kind of work to classrooms/
- How are time and materials managed, organized, etc.?
- What is the range of materials available?
- How do we support the development of personal connections to learning? What is the evidence that these connections are being made?
- How is planning done? Are units of study planned in great detail and ahead of actually meeting the class?

It is a huge amount of fun, especially with colleagues, to plan units of study in great detail. However, if plans get too full and our hearts get too set on being sure such and such happens, the time children need to pursue their own interests gets cut very short. Planning needs to be about the provision of rich and malleable materials, open-ended experiences and opportunities, and large ideas. It's about the creation of structures that give room and provide some shape, support, ways of engaging and extending children's thinking. It's about access and entry points: Where can kids find something interesting? Are varied ways of knowing and thinking possible? Are different patterns of relationships possible?

What kind of space/workplace/public space would be created if children, classrooms, and the school were 'reviewed' in these ways regularly? My experience in the middle school I directed tells me that it would be a school in which people were working to center on the person – child and adult – and his and her work. It would support individuals so that they can contribute to the community. It would say to children, teachers, and parents – it matters that you are here – and mean it. It would give room to the intellectual and expressive side of teaching. It would create schools and classrooms that would allow children, adolescents, and adults to gain a sense of who they are as persons and that would allow their being recognized as persons.

It would answer the question: What would a child-centered school or classroom look and be like?

[3] “Descriptive Review of a Space” by Patricia F. Carini (April 1994)

The chair provides a brief history of the space and states the focus of the review

Presentation of the space according to headings:

- Physical presence of the space
- Tenor and ambience of the space
- Connections and social life of the space
- Preferences, values, and standards embodied in the space
- Modes of learning and thinking fostered by the space

Chair summarizes major strengths and vulnerabilities of the space

Questions, comments, dialogue

Drawing out implications and connections

Summary and evaluation of the process

The following piece outlines the process Carini and others developed for reviewing the library at Machan School in Phoenix, AZ, in April of 1994. The process is adapted from other descriptive processes and tailored to this particular site. We invite teachers and administrators to adapt the process to their particular sites and questions.

Convening the Review

The chair for the review of space convenes the participants, announces the review topic, and locates the topic in the context of other related study of space at Machan (e.g., the January recollection of library experiences from childhood and the staff observations).

The chair gives a brief overview of the relevant history surrounding the space, noting that the space has recently been rebuilt and redesigned and that new staff have been hired.

The chair states the focus for the review, which was worked out ahead of time with the presenting teacher.

Presentation of the Space

(1) Physical Presence of the Space

This heading includes a physical description of the space (the dimensions; the arrangement of windows, doors, fixtures; flooring; other features of the space that are ‘givens’ or not easily altered). The physical description can be done as commentary, while touring the space, if that seems useful. Slides, photographs, and floor plans can also be used, as needed.

Describe choices that have been made. These might include furniture selections, decisions on color schemes and window treatments, ways of arranging or breaking up spaces, furniture placement and decorative touches. Talk, too, about choices in terms of book selection, location, and arrangement, and any other media located in the library such as films, tapes, etc.

From the presenting teacher’s point of view, describe what the space ‘invites’ and how people (children and adults) receive and respond to that invitation. Another way to think about this is in terms of what draws people and what distances them. Use plenty of supporting examples.

Portray a spectrum of ways the space has so far been used (by children and adults). Include ways that were planned or expected and those that just happened or were surprising. Describe, too, what parts of the library space were involved.

From the presenting teacher's point of view, characterize the rhythm, pace, and flow of activity through the library. Think of this in general first and then specify it for different times of the day or week or year.

Characterize, too, the presenting teacher's own presence and gesture in the library as well as those of other adults and that of children – in general and with some sense of range.

(2) Tenor and Ambience of the Space

This heading merges with the previous one, especially with respect to rhythm, space, and flow. In general it has to do with the feel or mood of the space and also its aesthetic.

The presenting teacher might start by describing the quality of light and sound in the space. What words come to mind when she thinks of the climate or mood of the room? What is the range among these words? Which stand out? How does the climate and mood vary in relation to time of day, who is in the library, etc.?

Describe what is the most appealing, inviting aspect of the room? What does she look forward to in being in the space? Which aspects or areas seem less appealing?

From the presenting teacher's point of view, what seems most appealing to children? to other adults? What is her sense of how they find the tenor of the space?

How does the tone of the space change (or sustain itself) in relation to activities that are happening or the people (including herself) who are in it?

(3) Connecting, Connections, and the Social Life of the Space

Start by describing the spaces within the library where people (children or adults) tend to cluster. Describe, too, any spaces little used by groups, but which may have potent connecting power for individuals (with books, for example, or for relaxation).

Then talk about the spectrum of connections children and adults make with the space and its contents; include the content or material that draws them, the duration of these connections, their tone, etc.

Describe the variety of connections children make with each other in the library. Talk about that in terms of the spaces involved, the tone of the connections, the purposes, etc. Then, do the same for adults in terms of their connections with each other and with children.

Talk about children who choose the library as a place to be apart from whole class visits or visits that are teacher-directed. Are there ways these children seem to the presenting teacher to be alike? What is her sense of how they discovered the library as a place to be and what it is that keeps them returning?

Talk about her own connections with the space and its contents and also with the children and with other adults. Think about where these connections happen – their tone, the reasons for them, their duration, etc.

What range of connections with the space and its contents is easily accommodated? What stretches the space to capacity? What can't be accommodated?

What range of connections between and among people is easily included in the library? What stretches those boundaries? What can't be accommodated?

(4) Preferences, Values, and Standards Embodied in the Space

In the library, what gets the most attention and time, care and interest from the presenting teacher? How is that attentiveness and caring expressed? What are the satisfactions for her? What gets in the way of giving that attention, time, and care?

As she sees it, how does it work for other adults and for the children in the library? That is, what calls out the most attention and time, care and interest from them? How does she see that expressed? What does she understand the satisfactions to be for them? What does she think hinders them or interrupts or distracts them?

Describe what she most values about the library – what is most important. What is her sense of what is most valued by the children and by other adults?

Taking a different slant, talk about what she most wants to have happen in the library now – and how she pictures that down the road. Another way to think about that is to describe her dreams for the library and to talk some about how these might be realized. Describe what she most does not want to have happen for and in the library.

Talk about standards she holds for the library. She might start with rules and the ways she talks with children and other adults about the use of the space. Think too about the standards children may hold for the library and those held by other adults. Describe how these views and standards mesh (or don't).

(5) Modes of Learning and Thinking Fostered by the Space

Start by thinking of children learning at the library or coming in search of information or knowledge or companionship or refuge. How would the presenting teacher describe the range of learning that happens? of the searching and exploring that occurs?

Describe the ways she thinks the library is most supportive of learning and the learning it is best equipped to foster. This can include qualities of space or tone as well as content. Is there learning, or ways of learning, that can't easily be supported in the library or through its resources?

Describe some children she thinks are especially benefited by the library. Describe some she doesn't think find in the library what they need and also, if she can, children who don't tend to use the library – and the factors she thinks may be involved.

Describe some occasions or events or activities in the library that stand out to her as including a wide spectrum of children productively. Think of some that in her estimation didn't work very well – or worked productively for only a few children.

Talk about what she thinks makes the library most accessible to many children as a place that can foster learning and growth.

Describe the ways that, from her point of view, allow other adults (parents and teachers) to use the library most productively to support children's learning. Describe how other adults tend to use the library, including her services, to enrich the classroom (or home) learning surround.

When she focuses on the library as a surround for learning and thinking, what words and images come to mind?

Summary: Major Strengths and Vulnerabilities of the Space

This description can refer back to any or all of the previous headings.

Chair's Integrative Restatement of Major Themes and Patterns Emergent from the Presentation of Space

Observations Made by Other Staff

The chair invites other staff who have made observations to share these. If there are a number of observations to be shared, an advance plan should be made about the order in which they will be presented and the time that will be needed. If one person has made several observations, it is helpful if these are integrated in some way that makes sense to the observer.

Comments, Questions, and Discussion

The chair invites participants to raise questions to the presenting teacher or to make comments on pieces of the presentation that stood out to them. Questions expand and clarify the presentation; comments often call attention to patterns embedded in the presentation that are usefully articulated.

If there are a lot of questions and comments, the chair integrates these before restating the focus for the review.

Concluding the Review

There may be suggestions related to the focus. It may also happen that the focus is changed by the review and that the conclusion is really a re-focusing or an articulation of important issues raised for future thought, inquiry, documentation, and/or observation. If that is the case, then suggestions may not occur and instead new directions or paths for inquiry are sketched.

Critique of Process

Especially with a new process, the first question is, 'Did it work well?' And then, 'What would we change?' And as always, 'Were people treated respectfully?' And, 'How do each of us feel about the role we played (chair, presenting teacher, observers, questioners and commentators, note-taker)?' And, 'Was the review helpful to the presenting teacher?'

Notes

The note-taker is selected in advance. Notes are kept of the chair's statements and integrative summaries and of recommendations or decisions about further inquiry, observations, etc. The

notes are transcribed following the session. The note-taker collects a copy of the teacher's presentation notes or narrative; these are attached to the transcribed notes. The note-taker includes in the notes any dates set for further review sessions and the names of the chair, presenting teacher, and note-taker for these sessions. A copy of the notes goes back to the presenting teacher; another is filed or placed in a notebook kept for these purposes

[4] “Descriptive Review of a School” by Patricia F. Carini (April 1994, revised May 1994)

The context for the following processes was the ongoing inquiry at Machan and Sunnyslope schools in Phoenix, AZ, in conjunction with the Center for Establishing Dialogue, directed by Carol Christine, where Patricia F. Carini worked as a consultant.

A *recollection* to precede the review (see pp. 58-60): each participant was asked to describe the pictures of school that had formed in their childhood and adolescence – images and experiences. Carini proposed the following headings for organizing memories and thoughts:

- School as location (physical and aesthetic)
- School as social connecting point for children, adults, community
- School as holder, source, and definer of knowledge, learning, culture
- School as it fostered thinking and learning

She also recommended the participants take a second slant and speak of the schools of their experience in terms of the politics of educating:

- Who was served?
- Who was excluded?
- Who determined the school agenda?
- Who ran the school?
- Who had a voice?
- What was the public image and presence of the school?

Review: Alternative One: The school principals lead off the review under the following headings:

- A close reading of some text which for them holds their vision of a school or has been thought-provoking, or a text which emblemizes Machan or Sunnyslope from their perspective
- A reflection on a keyword or idea
- The story of the school from their perspectives (see below)
- Questions and comments from the full group of participants
- Responsive stories and commentary from the staff of the school being reviewed
- Discussion, implications, looking ahead

Review: Alternative Two: A panel of teachers lead off the review, each person telling the story of the school from his or her particular slant (i.e., different class assignments, shorter or longer tenure at the school, etc.) using the following headings:

- Each panelist brings a text that emblemizes Machan or Sunnyslope for them – a piece of writing, a slide, a photograph.
- A reflection on a keyword that emerges from the discussion of the above texts
- The story of the school from a couple of angles – e.g., the historical and ethical/aesthetic. The historical might focus on the school’s journey, highlighting experiences that promoted or hindered growth or necessitated a change of course, identifying milestones or culminating moments along the way. Taking an aesthetic or ethical perspective, the focus might be the school as a connecting place for staff and for the community of children and families the school serves, attending to events and times that brought the school together and others when spirits sank.
- Discussion, implications, looking ahead

The Story of the School: from the principal’s perspective

- Starting points: guiding images the principal holds for the school and her role; key events leading up to her taking on the role of principal (key ideas and values, key people and experiences, first steps); the journey organized by important events (either fortunate or

hindering), important steps, experiences that prompted growth, experiences that had a stopping effect, experiments, culminating moments, growth points leading forward, resources and shortages)

- Another slant is looking at the coherence of the school: its presence and aesthetic, its guiding ethos and standards, its relation to learning and thinking for children, teachers, and parents. Add: the school at its most vital, the school at its bleakest.
- A third angle: a day in the life of the principal, giving a sense of the complexity of the role, the many claims, the competing demands and values, including 'outside' influences from the surrounding educational establishment, policy and regulatory functions of this establishment, the rhythms and values and vocabularies of these agencies as they mesh or not with the rhythms and values and vocabularies of the school
- A conclusion might be a description of the issues and opportunities the principal sees on the horizon and her thoughts about ways to take hold of them

A final reminder: all descriptive reviews are confidential and discussion of the proceedings is restricted to the group who participated in the review.

ROLES

[1] “Observing, Documenting, Presenting” by Mary Hebron

I'm going to start by making an obvious statement: *we need to know the children in order to teach them*. It is the everyday practice of looking at and seeing the children in our classrooms – what they are doing, what they are trying to do, what their purposes and intentions are, what they are making sense of – that gives us the understanding we need to teach them.

Here I'll turn to my own two children. They both had the good fortune to spend two years with the same teacher, Peggy Richards, in a multi-age kindergarten-first grade classroom. Peggy provisioned the classroom with a wide range of wonderful open-ended materials – blocks, sand and water, paints, math manipulatives, a workbench, clay, take-apart and ‘junk’ materials as well books of all kinds and implements for drawing and writing. The children brought their ideas, their questions, and their ways of working and learning to these materials.

My daughter entered kindergarten knowing how to read. She had taught herself by listening to books on records. At that time she didn't know all the names of the letters of the alphabet nor did she know sound-symbol correlation. Her father and I had read and re-read books to her from the very beginning. She became a fluent reader easily and quickly with the support of her K-1 teacher, who valued her approach to literacy by letting her read books she chose, by reading aloud to the group often, by allowing her to draw and write when and if she desired. This teacher knew Diana's strengths and her interests and used both to teach her.

Patrick's story is different. He is and has always been a kid who has three or four projects going, each topic of which he will develop into an area of expertise. Patrick is the scholar in our house, although in many school settings he might have been seen as a struggling learner, because he did not read until the summer after second grade.

Three years after Diana had been in Peggy's classroom, Patrick entered the K-1. The classroom materials and activities enabled him to pursue his many interests. He was recognized for his intellectual ability and encouraged to see himself as strong and capable, not as behind or as needing remediation. Most importantly, the classroom activities and materials enabled his teacher to observe him doing what he does well. Patrick was a builder who saw the world in 3-D. His teacher understood from the way he worked at the workbench that he is a person who starts from the whole. Blocks and Lego were not preferred media for him, because they require assembling many small parts to make a whole. He preferred aluminum foil, clay, and junk materials that come together holistically to recreate the aspect of the world being explored.

Patrick entered reading in the same way. He needed to focus on the whole story. The small parts, letters and sounds, were not ways in. They confused him. We read to him a lot, as did his teacher. He had a huge base of book language in his ear, and he had an enormous body of background knowledge from his many projects and pursuits. Peggy allowed him to come to reading in his own way by recognizing Patrick's strengths and his approaches to learning. In elementary and middle school, Patrick chose mainly non-fiction texts – catalogs, magazines, how-to books – to build on what he knew by making things. He is now, at 17, a strong reader who enjoys all kinds of texts including poetry, fiction, and non-fiction.

Two children, very different in their approach to becoming literate people, who both derive great pleasure and knowledge from acts of literacy. What enabled that?

By creating classrooms which make children visible to themselves and to us through their strengths, we learn how best to teach them. Classrooms with blocks, paint, sand, water, dramatic play, outdoor activity as well as wonderful literature, books for research and inquiry, and all kinds of drawing and writing implements. In classrooms that offer a range of media and materials, learning is embedded in real life activity. Classrooms like this assure us of two things – that children have the appropriate materials to make knowledge for themselves and that the teacher will be able to get to know the children.

As a person who still spends a lot of time in classrooms, I know that many things get in the way of getting to know the children – time, numbers of children in a class, outside expectations, our own standards, the need to cover curriculum, the structure of the day, and the way we conceive the work of teaching. I believe there is a real need to rethink teaching, recognizing our primary role as getting to know the children.

Getting to know the children does not feel doable if the classroom organization is centered on the teacher and if the teacher initiates most of the activity and oversees the follow-through of that activity. If we are at the front of the room, directing teacher initiated activities, we have little time or opportunity to get to know the children. And if getting to know children is seen as separate from teaching – the teacher standing apart with a clipboard in hand – then getting to know children again feels undoable, because it comes between us and the children and removes us from our role in facilitating children's learning.

This way of thinking about teaching and learning raises questions:

- How can the teacher make space for children's interests and their ability to pursue ideas and interests through a variety of media?
- What is the teacher's role in a classroom where children work on activities they choose?
- How do observation and description as ordinary teaching practices allow children to be visible to us and allow them to work and learn for themselves?
- How do we keep track of what children are doing?
- Do we need to see everything and is that possible?
- What do we need to record – when, how often, how?

There are no easy answers to these questions. They require placing trust in children as makers of their own knowledge and trust in ourselves as makers of knowledge about the children and their learning. They require looking at what children can do, looking at them in different contexts, observing them as they work on activities of interest to them, documenting their work on questions and problems in real life contexts, and observing them over time in order to get a full picture, not merely a snapshot.

Observing

People are excellent observers. Each day we incorporate into our being countless observations without even making a conscious effort to do so. We know the individual sounds of footsteps of various family members as they enter the house. We can identify a friend walking away from us at a distance, without even seeing her face, just by the gesture and stance. We can identify a loved one on the telephone by hearing a simple hello. And we take all this in 'through the skin,' so to speak.

How can we put this powerful human capacity to work for us in our work with children?

A first step is for a teacher to recognize that she has been observing children all along, but perhaps not calling it observing or giving herself credit for it. Teachers soak up all kinds of impressions and knowledge of children, and they need only to recognize that that knowledge is there and is of value. The next step is to make the observations conscious and directed, paying attention to *what* is noticed and *when*, and to increase in whatever ways possible the opportunities to expand what is being seen. For example, a child out on the playground may look quite different from that same child reading. A child sitting in group discussion presents a different opportunity for observing than the same child doing a project.

Going back to the examples of my own children, their teacher had abundant opportunities to get a sense of how each of them was making sense of the world, because she had provided a variety of materials and opportunities for children to actively engage with them and with each other. She could see the choices they made. She could tell what held their interest. She could observe how they made sense of their work.

A teacher eager to expand possibilities for observing might ask herself the following:

- What are the choices available to the children?
- How often am I able to see them involved with something they really want to do?
- When do those opportunities occur, and how often?
- What variety of materials and activities are available for children to select from?
- Are there ways I can expand opportunities for choice and engagement?

All observing requires selection. A teacher heightens awareness of what she is seeing by asking herself, what am I looking for? In this way she will better understand what she is valuing in her observing. It is never possible to get it all. We make choices about what we look at and what meaning we will give to what we see. If a teacher assumes that every child is trying to make sense of his or her experiences, then she will look for that. This means she won't rush to judgment or hastily dismiss as silly, frivolous, or incorrect what she doesn't immediately grasp. Instead the teacher will make note of what may be puzzling, store it away for further thought, and watch for other choices the child may make or other ways the child relates to materials or people or learning that may shed light on earlier observations.

If a teacher makes seeing the child as who she or he is, setting aside preconceptions of what the child should or ought to be, she gives value to whatever it is this child – and no other – brings. If a teacher values all that the child is, she steps away from that well-engrained school habit of looking at the child as a “problem.” If she values the child's point of view, she will be able to take advantage of every opportunity to see the world through the child's lens.

Looking from the child's angle, the teacher will raise questions that will guide her observations positively and productively:

- What does this child wonder about?
- What does she or he notice and look at?
- What questions does she or he have?
- How does this child make sense of the world?

Documenting

Teachers face the task each year of getting to know a class of children. It is seldom the case that teachers can sit apart and observe, writing down observations as they make them. Observing, for classroom teachers, is a process of *soaking up* as they work with children. Informed noticing, while working alongside children, is the key to making observing doable. With this in mind, when I work with teachers on ways to record and document their observations, I usually suggest that a teacher start by jotting down what she notices on post-its or in some other convenient way. These are brief jottings such as:

- [Paul]¹ watches as other children paint at the easel. Seems interested but says no when asked.
- [Susan] back after three day absence. Went back to the work she'd begun with pulleys. Rejoined group easily.
- [Mattie] spent a lot of time revising her story. Wrote on a clipboard apart from other writers but enthusiastically shared piece with friends at the end of the morning.

For the teacher who is intent on noticing the child, these few written words will hold in place a larger story.

The jottings can be reviewed at the end of a week for patterns and insights. In this way, a picture begins to form of a child's interests, preferred media, pace – and these become questions to return to. On the basis of these brief notes, as they are compiled and reflected upon, a teacher can write a short narrative record for each child – probably no more than several lines.

- [Etrendia] draws each morning when she first arrives. Her drawings are complex, with lots of detail. She has been working on a series of drawings of animals. Her reading is coming along very well. She has gained confidence and chooses from simple chapter books now. This confidence is not always seen in math work. She made wonderfully complex and symmetrical pattern block designs this week, but was frustrated by some math games that involved adding numbers on dice. She wants to be able to get the answer without counting the dots.
- [Allen] has accomplished a lot this week. He has taken a major role in the production of the play – writing parts, designing sets, assigning roles. He gets along with most of the children in the class, and his good-natured approach to things makes him an accepted “director” for the play. In Tuesday's meeting, he shared the work he has been doing in class rebuilding a VCR. He has a lot of knowledge of electronics and enjoys teaching others. His preferred reading this week was “how things work” books. He still wants to finish Hatchet, which he began last week.

If the class is large and the time is short, I usually advise teachers to write the narrative notes for five or six children each week. Approached this way, by the end of a month, she will have recorded her observations for each child in the class. This monthly record, though concise, will serve to pull forward additional knowledge of the child.

Collecting children's work is another piece of documenting that enables us to come to know the child. Accompanying the teacher's written record with the on-going collection of each child's two-dimensional work in folders and with photographs of three-dimensional work adds depth to

¹ Brackets indicate pseudonyms. The examples come from my work with teachers in various public schools and from descriptive reviews completed at Prospect's Fall Conferences.

the understanding of each child as a thinker and learner. By spreading the work out, a teacher (perhaps along with the parents and child) is able to see the child's preferred media, themes, and approaches to work and learning.

I'm including in documentation:

- brief narrative notes of about a fourth of the class, written each week, drawing on daily jottings
- collections of children's work – samples of drawings, paintings, writing, and photos of 3-D work
- performance samples such as running records, which are more formalized.

Presenting

Observing and documenting children and their work is particularly useful if it is reviewed periodically, and one way to do that is to use the Descriptive Review of the Child (described earlier in this booklet). The five headings of the review serve as a valuable framework for organizing observations of the child and for seeing where further observation and documenting is needed. The descriptive review format enables a teacher to create a cohesive description of each child that assists her in teaching the child, in conferring with parents and other teachers, and in curriculum development.

When would a teacher present a Descriptive Review of a Child? Sometimes the teacher feels she doesn't have the insight she needs to support a particular child. Or a child may catch her attention because of what this child can teach her about the range and possibility among persons and learners. Or describing a child's or several children's approaches to learning may inform curriculum development and teaching practice.

A teacher's decision to focus on a particular child can come at any time in the school year:

- It may be prompted early in the year by a conversation with a parent or with colleagues in the school.
- The teacher may feel that the child is visible only in limited ways outside the home, or visible in the classroom in ways that do not bring forward the child's strengths.
- A child's approach to a subject matter discipline may need articulation and clarification, with an effort toward gaining insight into supporting the child's ways of making knowledge.
- The child's place in the social context of the classroom or school may raise questions about the teacher's or parent's role in assisting with connections to other children.
- Later in the school year, the teacher or parent may want to take a longitudinal look at the child as a maker, accompanying a Descriptive Review of the Child's Work over time with a Descriptive Review of the Child.

The teacher, in each of these instances, presents a descriptive review because she wants the benefit of other perspectives to gain a more layered and *nuanced* sense of the child and the work of teaching the child.

Whatever draws a teacher to presenting a Descriptive Review of a Child, she will begin the process by reviewing what she knows about the child. Reading through observational jottings and journal entries, spreading out and reviewing the child's work, speaking with others who know

the child, often including the parents, are important ways to begin the review process. The teacher then uses the five headings of the Descriptive Review of the Child and the guiding questions in the “Letter to Parents and Teachers” developed by Patricia Carini, to organize and fill out her jottings. The teacher fills out the description with additional observing. She may invite a colleague to make an observation of the child while the child is engaged in activity in or out of the classroom.

Once the teacher has decided she wants to present the child and has begun to develop the description, she will select a chair. The chair’s role is to work with the presenting teacher or parent throughout the process of gathering together the description of the child, formulating the focus question for the review, and selecting the review circle participants. The chair, through thoughtful questioning, draws out what the teacher knows about the child to add to the developing description. The chair assists in refining the language of the review, so that it is descriptive and apt. The chair may observe the child and review child’s work to assist in developing a full description and a focus question that is pertinent and appropriate.

In schools where teachers meet regularly to share descriptions of children and of teaching practice, the process of selecting review participants may already be established. Otherwise, selecting supportive colleagues is a matter of thoughtful consideration based on what the teacher hopes to get out of the review. Including the teachers from the next grade level may be useful at the end of a school year in considering the components of a supportive environment for a particular child’s continued education. A cross-section of teachers across grade levels and years of experience may give a broad and varied view of ways of working with a child who stands out in mainstream approaches to teaching. Including administrators, as well as other school personnel, may be important in supporting a child through strength in the larger school context.

The presenter may choose to write out the review in a narrative form or speak from well-developed notes. In either instance, it is important to have a conversational tone that enables the review participants to feel included and connected. Stories and particular examples from the classroom or home bring the description to life. If read, the narrative should be punctuated with these stories. The teacher or parent can also decide when and how to share photos and works of the child so that it doesn’t distract from but supports the verbal description. If a collection of the child’s work is to be exhibited, the chair and teacher discuss in advance how to introduce it and when to give participants ample time to look at it.

The descriptive review headings serve the dual purpose of assuring that the review takes into account all aspects of the person, while assisting the listeners in envisioning the child. Important questions often arise regarding the inclusion of a child’s family and medical histories. These questions need careful, respectful consideration by the presenter and chair, taking into account the needs and privacy of the particular child and family. Deciding to include a child’s ethnicity and race, and how to include it, also needs careful consideration: for example, doing the review may be one way to examine embedded assumptions about family and culture that may be skewing perceptions of a particular child.

Articulating the focus question for the review can be the most confounding part of preparing a descriptive review of a child. The teacher may begin the review process knowing what she wants to consider with the help of the review circle. It may be an open-ended question of getting to know the child better. It may be a question that arose out of a particular incident or concern.

- “This is an exploratory review to see [Susan] more clearly. Also the teacher would like to get a clearer picture of Susan’s influence in class, a finger on the pulse of her presence in the room.”
- “The teacher’s interest in reviewing [Carlos] is to think together about the balance between providing this child with opportunities and experiences that enable him to become a reader, writer, math thinker, etc., and at the same time allow him to follow his own interests and ways of looking at the world in order to support and preserve his confidence in himself as a learner.”
- “To think together about ways that may help [Anita] make the transition to second grade, taking into account her parents’ willingness and support in allowing her time and space to pursue who she is, as well as their awareness of second grade expectations.”
- “This is a review of a child who uses a range of found materials, an inventor focused on the made-world. How are his interests visible or recognized in middle school? In what ways would secondary school need to be re-imagined to enable and support his strengths, interests, and approaches to learning?”

Often, in the process of drawing together her knowledge of the child, the teacher gains clarity regarding the questions that led her to review the child. She may even feel that she has gained sufficient insight by reflecting on her observations of the child to make doing the review itself seem less urgent. It is therefore important that the focus of the review be formulated or re-formulated once the description is ready to be shared.

Conclusion

The ongoing observation and documentation of children and their work and the presentation of descriptive reviews of children about whom we need to gain additional understanding and support serve us in many ways

- to inform the teaching of the individual child by documenting the child's process and progress over the year,
- to make visible to parents, administrators, and future teachers a child's interests, strengths, approaches to learning,
- to particularize our understanding of child development, teaching, and learning,
- to learn about the vast range and variety of learners,
- to inform curriculum planning – for the year and across the school – by focusing in on how different children learn, what they value, and how they approach learning.

This work of observing and documenting children is not easy to do alone. We need to work together, perhaps forming child study groups across grades. In places where I see this happening, it lends teachers a sense of professionalism and gives them a direct responsibility for their development as teachers. It also recognizes what teachers know and what they come to understand by being with children, and that is essential for facilitating the children's learning.

[2] “Chairing” by Betsy Wice and Rhoda Kanevsky

Dear Teachers and Parents,

We are two members of a collaborative inquiry group, the Philadelphia Teachers Learning Cooperative. Our group has been meeting every week since 1978, using the Prospect processes. Members come from many different schools in the Philadelphia area. Some of the earliest members are still attending meetings; others have joined the group more recently – including new teachers who have been coming for just a few years. Because our group is a collaborative, we have prepared ourselves to take on the various roles of presenting and chairing.

We are writing this letter to share what we’ve learned about the role of chair and to tell how we encourage leadership for a wide range of members. But chairing can seem daunting. How does a chair guide the group through the steps of a Descriptive Review of a Child? (See pp.10-12, 13-19.) How does the chair support both the presenter and the group? What does it mean to gather threads, to articulate themes, to find clusters of meanings? How does a chair move from the specific details to a more general level, to discuss the implications of this review for educational practice?

In this letter we will talk about two aspects of chairing and the kind of listening which makes this chairing possible: the listening that happens ahead of time, when the chair and presenter meet to work on the focus for the review, and the listening and valuing that happen on the spot, during the review itself.

Ahead of Time

The person who will serve as the chair listens to the presenter talk about the child and about the classroom. From this initial conversation, the two colleagues find a way into the review. What question does the teacher have about the child? What would be a productive focus for the teacher and for the group? Keeping in mind the five headings of the Descriptive Review of the Child, what information will portray the child as fully as possible? How can the review take us into another teacher’s world? If the teacher can bring a floor plan (a rough map of the classroom) and a brief schedule of a typical day, it will help the group to understand the classroom context for the student.

The chair encourages the presenter to gather the student’s work. If there is time before the review, it is very helpful for the presenter and chair to look through the student’s work together (see *From Another Angle*, chapter 4). The chair and presenter figure out a good way to introduce this work. Will we have the student’s drawings hanging up before the session starts, so participants can begin looking at the range of pictures? Will we pass around the journals, or quote from them, during the section on Modes of Thinking and Learning?

On the Spot

On the day of the review, the chair is the person who gets the meeting started. She assigns a note-taker who records the chair’s integrated summaries and the comments, and suggestions. At our weekly meetings in Philadelphia, we sit in a circle and start the meeting by asking all participants to tell their names and where they’re working. (Of course this won’t be necessary if all participants work in the same school and already know each other well). We find it important to go over some ground rules, especially if we notice that newcomers are part of the circle. We prepare the group for the process by saying that we will first hear an uninterrupted presentation, organized under these five headings: Physical Presence and Gesture, Disposition and

Temperament, Connections with Others, Strong Interests and Preferences, and Modes of Thinking and Learning. We assure the group that after the uninterrupted presentation there will be time for questions, and that later in the process, the presenter will welcome suggestions that relate to the focus question. We remind participants of the importance of confidentiality and that what is said in the group is not shared outside the group unless there are suggestions to do so. We also mention our hope that there will be time at the end to discuss implications of the review for our classrooms and for our practice. Through looking closely at one student in one classroom, we expect to learn about other students in other classrooms, and about education in general.

During the presentation, the chair listens in a very particular way, noting not only the specific details about the child, but also the themes, questions, and larger issues she hears in relation to the focus of the review. These notes are not simply a shorthand version of the presenter's journey through the five review headings; they often suggest where the review might be going. The chair stays alert to recurring aspects of the whole child who will emerge out of all the headings. The chair listens for ways that one heading may illuminate another heading. For example, under the heading of Physical Presence and Gesture, we get a picture of [Kevin]², a child who enters the room tentatively, takes a while before he hangs up his jacket, and takes more time before he joins the morning activity. Later, in the section on Connections with Others, we learn that it wasn't until November that he consistently chose to work with [John] (now his best friend). Later, during Modes of Thinking and Learning, we hear that Kevin sits for quite a while in front of an empty piece of paper. When we pass around his journal, we find short but packed statements. Listening across headings, the chair notes some consistencies, which might offer insights about this child. The chair may also notice some surprises or things she heard that were unexpected.

After the presentation, the chair makes an integrative summary, which highlights the consistencies and possibly the inconsistencies that she heard across the headings. Her restatement will also help the group realize which areas we still don't know much about. (Where in the classroom or play yard does Kevin seem to be less reserved? What activities is he drawn to? What books does he choose for himself?)

The participants trust that we will be in a new place after hearing patterns that the chair has articulated (such as Kevin's pace). The next stage of the process – the questioning stage – will take off from the chair's summary. No two chairs will integrate the presenter's description in quite the same way. The processes are human processes. From week to week, we find that the shape of the meeting will vary according to who is present, who is chairing, and what is the focus.

Here are some ways of listening, which have helped chairs organize what they hear in the presentation for a restatement:

- Listen for clusters of images
- Listen for information that relates to the student's strengths
- Listen for information that relates to the student's vulnerabilities
- Listen for polarities – qualities that may be strengths, but in different contexts (or in the extreme) can become vulnerabilities
- Listen for things that don't yet make sense, things we still have to find out
- Listen for information that informs the focus of the review.

² Brackets indicate pseudonyms.

In the summary (also called integrative restatement), the chair helps the group to see how the focus question relates to the information that has just been presented. When the chair pulls out overlapping and divergent aspects of the child, she creates a larger context for the ideas, placing them in new relationships (see too *From Another Angle*, pp. 109 -110).

The success of the process does not depend on how long or short the restatement may be. In our weekly Philadelphia meetings, we are conscious of time constraints (our brief two hours together). We have also learned there are certain short cuts that interfere with our work. It is not good to save time by cutting out a summary; as a group, we do better with periodic summaries, which clarify where we are going and serve to refocus our thinking.

We've also learned that the restatement is not about defining or closing down the inquiry. It's not about finding answers or solving problems. Its value lies in what it can evoke from the participants – what new possibilities we can imagine, what further questions may arise from how the ideas overlap or diverge, what meaning this review has for our own work in our own classrooms and our own schools.

We move to the next phase of the review. Now the chair is the leader who assures that each listener will get a chance to voice questions that have occurred to her during the presentation. After each question, the presenter gives an answer. Many of these answers spark further questions. All the time, the chair is listening for how the new information sheds light on the focus question. When necessary, the chair may stop the questioning so she can give a brief summary of the new information learned from these questions and answers. Occasionally a group member, eager to offer a suggestion, may phrase it in question form (e.g., “Why don't you . . .” or “Have you ever tried . . .”). The chair's job is to remind the participant to hold this idea until more questions have been heard and we feel ready to move on to our recommendation or suggestions phase (see *From Another Angle*, pp. 117-121).

As we finish with questions and move to comments and suggestions, the chair again states the focus question. She reminds the group that the presenter will listen to each comment but will not reply to it. We want to hear a wide variety of suggestions. This is a time to think about the range of what is possible for teachers and children in classrooms. The presenter is under no obligation to use all (or any) of the suggestions. Some of the suggestions may contradict other suggestions. This phase of the review has a different quality from the give-and-take dialogue of the questions phase. The presenter doesn't need to respond (e.g., “But I already do that!” or “I would never feel comfortable doing that in my classroom.”).

After the suggestions have been heard, the chair succinctly groups the ideas (without judging them or reconciling them). We hope there is time for a brief discussion of larger implications of the review. If there isn't time, we note that the issue needs its own meeting in the future. We also make space for a quick critique of the process. How did it go today? Did we respect the child? Did we respect the teacher? Did we respect all members of today's group? In addition, we restate the importance of confidentiality.

Throughout this review, the chair has been listening carefully on many levels, aware of the vulnerability of the presenter and also aware of the particular needs of the group. Here the chair may feel a pull in opposite directions. The presenter should not feel under attack. After all, the review exists to support the presenting teacher in her inquiry about the child. But if at all possible, we avoid silencing any group member. If someone has a concern, there should be room

to say it. Allowing someone to spin out her ideas is consistent with our respect for individual thought. However, the chair may have to intervene (e.g., “This is not the place to have this conversation.” or “We can take this up later.”). But on the whole, we have found that the process is sturdy enough to allow for unexpected twists and turns.

We have written this letter to help others feel comfortable using the descriptive processes in this booklet. We hope many of you, our readers, will try chairing. Our experiences have taught us how much we learn from taking on the role of the chair: we learn about students; we learn about classrooms; we learn about the processes; we learn about listening and about the possibilities that come from thinking together.

Yours truly,

Betsy Wice and Rhoda Kanevsky,
two members of the Philadelphia Teachers Learning Cooperative

[3] “Suggestions for Observers” by Patricia F. Carini

These guidelines are based on my own experience observing in classrooms. Adapt them in ways that are comfortable for you, keeping in mind that an observer is a guest in someone else’s room and that children have a right to ask you not to watch what they are doing.

- Use a small notepad, if possible. It’s less obtrusive and easier to handle. A 3” x 5” spiral works well. There is also a marble memo composition book that is 4.5” x 3.5” but anything that fits your hand well will be fine.
- Locate yourself – don’t remain standing or loom over kids. Keep your participation with them low key and minimal (without being unfriendly). If you sense that your presence is inhibiting, move further away or choose another child or set of children to observe.
- If you don’t have the name of a child you want to refer to in your notes, refer to them by some identifying characteristic so you can later get the name from the teacher.
- Give yourself time to get the ‘feel’ of what’s going on by just hanging out. Mapping the room in advance also helps this.
- Keep just enough notes so that *immediately after* the observation you can replay what you saw and heard and make a fuller transcript. The exception to this is to try as much as possible to get down a child’s words verbatim. Even though you won’t succeed, what you do get will have more of the child in it than a summarization of content.
- Every five or ten minutes or so, insert the time next to what you are recording. A time chronology helps a lot when going back over the notes.
- If a child is both talking a lot and doing a lot, alternate your focus, sometimes attending more to the talk, sometimes more to the doing – or make a decision to give one or the other the bulk of your attention.

After the observation, find a quiet spot outside the classroom to replay the scene and expand your notes. For this writing, use your journal or a notebook or a computer.

One way to start is to give yourself up to ten minutes of writing freely and impressionistically – what stood out to you, your first takes, what sense you are making of what you saw. Giving yourself permission to do this allows you to clear your mind and provides a place to put the thoughts and feelings and questions you have in response to the observation.

From this expansion of the notes, prepare a description of what you saw. If time permits, it is useful practice to use the expanded notes to transcribe the observation into narrative form (full sentences, paragraphs, etc.), with the aim of making them *descriptive* – that is, not merely factual or behavioral but apt and vivid so that someone else reading them can get the sense and feel of what was happening. If time is an issue, plan your description from the expanded notes, giving the same close attention to using descriptive language.

Sometimes when transcribing, I divide the journal page into two columns. In the left column, I write out the description. In the right, I put down my reflections and intuitions in response to the observation.