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Resisting the "Single Story"

Ellen Schwartz

[Note: All children's names have been changed to pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the children.]

I first came in contact with The Prospect School and Center in 1984. I had just completed my first year of teaching and, at the recommendation of a professor from graduate school, I signed up for a Summer Institute. I had little idea what I was getting into, and when I arrived I discovered that many of the other participants had connections to Prospect's methodology through participation in local inquiry groups. We read and discussed books like Ernest Schachtel's *Metamorphosis* (1959) and Edith Cobb's *The Ecology of the Imagination in Childhood* (1977). Though my grasp of this material was tenuous at best, it nonetheless fascinated me and left me hungering for more. At the heart of the Institute was an extended child study of Holly, a child then attending The Prospect School. While Holly was at the school, another wing of Prospect, the Archive Scholars and Fellows Project was engaged in an in-depth study of Prospect's collections of children's work and teachers' narrative records. Their work was soon thereafter published as the Reference Edition of the Prospect Archive, comprised of longitudinal collections of the work and records of 36 children, with a slide selection and catalogue for each child. That summer we worked with the still developing collection of Holly's work, describing several pieces and closely reading the records to date. Late in the week, we went to the school, where Holly's teacher, Jessica Howard, presented a Descriptive Review of Holly, a portrayal of Holly with a focusing question to which we were invited to respond. (Descriptive Review of the Child is one of Prospect's collaborative inquiry processes and is described more fully in *From Another Angle* [Himley, 2000]). As I listened to Jessica, I felt that I already *knew* Holly, even though, in fact, I had never met her. That alone might have sold me on the value of what was going on at Prospect, but there was more.

I came into teaching in my thirties, though I had taught for a year in a bilingual program in Dorchester, Massachusetts, in the early 1970s, worked in a school-based youth center in England, and taught English in the former Yugoslavia. I was certainly drawn to teaching, but I could never quite figure out how I could fit into schools, which seemed to me to be so much about control, both mental and physical, and so little about what was really compelling to me: the children themselves. I had managed to find kindred spirits wherever I worked, but I needed more than a few understanding friends and colleagues to find my way in the public school system. I have always had a strong commitment to public education, and I knew that if I managed to find a place for myself in education it would be in the public sphere.

Fast forward to 1983, and I found myself back in the public schools after completing a graduate program at Antioch New England that gave me some hope about possibilities in public education. I landed a job at a small rural school in Vermont with a supportive principal, and felt that there was a chance I could make it in public school.

Observing and describing, which are at the heart of Prospect's work, were a natural fit for me. My teaching journals from those as far back as the 1970s were full of

descriptions of what children were doing, alongside my own efforts to make sense of what was happening in the classroom or youth center. What I lacked was a systematic way to think about what I was noticing and to use it to plan curriculum that built on the strengths and interests of children.

This is what I was introduced to that summer at Prospect, and it held an immediate appeal. I was eager to get back to the classroom and put into practice what I had learned: to start my own collections of children's work, to expand the role of choice time in my classroom, to pay closer attention to the children's choices, to keep more systematic records, and to draw on all these resources in planning for the children.

I probably bit off more than I could chew that next year, but if I couldn't do it all the way I had hoped, it didn't really matter because I discovered that whatever I *could* do in the time I had was helpful to me in thinking about and provisioning for the children. The next winter I had the opportunity to do a Descriptive Review of a child. David Carroll, then working at Prospect, was leading a series of workshops in a district neighboring my own. When he invited me to do a Descriptive Review, I was a bit nervous, recalling Jessica's Review of Holly and feeling that I couldn't come near the fullness of that description. Encouraged by David and eager for the responses from the participants that would come at the end of the Review, I agreed. The workshop was about literacy, so David suggested I select a child about whom I had questions in that area. I easily settled on Gene because I was concerned about how hard reading was for him. He was curious, particularly about anything to do with math, science, and machinery, and he also enjoyed stories and drama. He pored over books, especially non-fiction. Yet the mechanics of reading was a huge challenge for him and I worried that he wasn't learning to read "fast enough" and that he would get discouraged and start to think of himself as a non-reader, or even as "stupid." He had been retained a year before entering my class and was aware that he was older than the other children.

I started working on my Review under David's guidance. A few weeks before the Review, I remember talking with David about how the problem seemed to have disappeared, and I even wondered whether the Review would be necessary. Not that Gene had suddenly blossomed into a fluent reader, but in seeing him more fully, I was also appreciating his slant on the world, especially his insistence that things make sense. I was no longer so worried about him. In retrospect, I think that what had changed was located neither in Gene nor in me but in our relationship. Paying close attention to his strengths, stretching to describe him specifically, to portray him so he would come across to the participants in the Review as a person they could know much as I had known Holly—all of this brought me closer to Gene. David suggested that I record Gene reading aloud and transcribe his reading under a copy of the text. In one workshop session, the participants listened to the recording and described the transcription. I was interested and reassured to discover that Gene was stopping himself when his initial read didn't make sense, rereading and making corrections until he arrived at a reasonable rendering. That slowed him down, of course, but it also meant that he was reading for meaning. Most importantly, I could share this with Gene, letting him know that he was a slow reader not because he was stupid but because he wouldn't settle for nonsense in reading or anything

else. This didn't mean that I stopped working with him on decoding strategies, but it became clearer to me that Gene's difficulties in reading were tied into his strengths—especially his eye for pattern, his ability to see connections, and his focus on meaning.

I begin with this story about my own early years as a teacher and my own entrée into the work of Prospect because it was transformative for me as a teacher and laid the foundation on which a 30-year connection was built. I continued to attend summer institutes, fall conferences, and spring conferences at Prospect; I have attended, and continue to attend, a inquiry group rooted in Prospect's philosophy and methodology; I served briefly on the Board and less briefly on the Archives Committee; I have co-edited a book, *Making Space for Active Learning* (Martin & Schwartz, 2014), a collection of teaching stories, essays, and interviews that show what this work can look like in settings far from Prospect's own school.

In 2013 I retired from classroom teaching. During my years in the classroom I had seen an increasing move to label children and families in terms of their perceived deficiencies. Poor families, immigrant families, and families of color are disproportionate recipients of these labels, and, increasingly, the practice is spreading. The pushback, when it comes, is about money: Too many children are being referred for special education, meaning too much money is being spent, so it becomes harder to get children coded. What is not happening in any sort of whole-scale way is support for teachers in recognizing and building on children's capacities. Rather, the deficit view of education is in full force, just with fewer supports for children, families, and teachers. Actually, that is a mild way of summing up the current educational climate. It would be more accurate to say that childhood, families, and the profession of teaching are under escalating attack.

What was most helpful to me with Gene, and many other children I've taught over the years, was the opportunity to really think about him as a person and a learner. The insight I got about his insistence on meaning opened doors for me as his teacher in all areas, not just reading. Just drilling him more, or having him do remedial reading while the children regarded as more able were doing so-called *enrichment* activities—two practices that are becoming more common in the frenzy about raising test scores—would not have served him well. When, later in the year, he came into his own as a reader, it was largely through his passion to get information from the science books he loved. But that alone would not have been enough to sustain him. He needed, too, to be doing science. He was full of ideas for experiments and eager to try them out, often enlisting classmates in these endeavors. His desire to have accurate records gave him a reason for writing, whereas fiction or narrative writing was less compelling to him.

Prospect is strongly rooted in the value of identifying children's strengths and using them as a foundation for teaching and learning. This stems from the recognition that *all people* have capacities, which is evident in any classroom or other venue that affords enough choice to *see* what each person is drawn to and capable of. It is tied to a democratizing view of education, as Patricia Carini has stated:

If only a few children are normal and truly capable, it does not take great social or political acuity to guess which children and whose will be favored. In other words, I insist on this broad terrain of widely distributed capacity to propel a democratizing of the public schools, and the society. (Carini, 2001, p. 15).

Practitioner Fellowships

In 2005, Prospect's extensive archives were donated to Special Collections at the University of Vermont (UVM). A financial gift from Prospect—given at the time the Center closed in 2010—was used to fund two annual fellowships, a Research Fellowship and a set of Practitioner Fellowships. For the first three years of these fellowships (2012-2014), I have served as a mentor to the Practitioner Fellows. The purpose of these fellowships, as described on the UVM web site is

...to introduce the Prospect Archives, to make the Prospect Archives accessible to a wide audience, and to demonstrate the value of the Prospect Archives for educators and the community. This includes calling to the attention of the public and the schools the resources available within the Archives and through their study. A further aim of the Practitioner Fellowship program is to support the establishment of leadership for “communities of inquiry” within recipients’ own settings by showing how the Descriptive Processes developed at Prospect help people to think more deeply about their practice and current issues in education. (University of Vermont, n.d.)

Fellowship applicants submit proposals detailing what they hope to accomplish and how they see the fellowship work impacting future practice. Each summer, the Practitioner Fellows meet for a week at UVM. This week is organized as a seminar in which the teachers work collectively with one child’s collection and individually with any parts of the archive that are of interest. The full archive, to which the Fellows have access, includes the children’s collections and documentation of other activities carried out at Prospect. From its earliest days, Prospect was conceived as a school and research institution, the two inextricably intertwined, each informing the other. One mission of the research and work with teachers was to ensure that the practices developing at the school would have wide applicability in public education, especially in urban areas. Prospect developed strong connections with public school districts in Philadelphia, Ithaca, Paterson, New York City, Mamaroneck, and Phoenix, to name a few. In addition to the children’s collections and the Reference Edition mentioned earlier, the archive includes documentation of the summer institutes, fall and spring conferences, teacher education program, and consulting done by Prospect staff. It also shows the development of Prospect’s philosophy and methodology as reflected in reports, articles, and talks. More closely tied to the school is the extensive documentation of curriculum, planning, formation of group¹, and studies of children. Even this is just a smattering.²

The Practitioner Fellows are immersed in materials that reflect the work of educators involved in the day-to-day business of figuring out how to educate children in

full recognition of their capacities. Though the documents are old and the school and center no longer exist, the interest they evoke is lively.

Introducing Three Fellows

Three recipients of the Practitioner Fellowships generously offered to write reflections about their fellowship experience and where it is leading in their own practice. Rebecca Mack and Jerusha Beckerman participated in the summer of 2013. Rebecca had been introduced to the Prospect Archive by Jed Norris, a colleague of hers at the Burlington Children's Space, who had been a 2012 Fellow. During the 2012-2103 school year, she had begun to explore the archive on her own and had also been reading essays by Patricia Carini to develop an understanding of the thought and practice associated with Prospect. Jerusha is a graduate of the Art of Teaching Program at Sarah Lawrence College (SLC), which draws heavily on the work of Prospect. She had continued her involvement by attending the Saturday Seminars at SLC, in which graduates of the Art of Teaching program and other colleagues engage in descriptive inquiry. Lara Ramsey was a Fellow in 2012, the first year of the fellowship program. She had learned about Prospect in her doctoral work at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and had organized a monthly Teacher Roundtable that used descriptive protocols for looking at children's work and teachers' records and plans. Each person came with a specific proposal in mind, and each proposal evolved during the week and beyond.

In Prospect's collaborative inquiry processes, each person speaks uninterrupted. This allows the speakers to be fully heard in their own right and enables listeners to attend fully to each participant. It also puts time for reflection between the speakers and the responses, which come after everyone has spoken. In line with that process, each of the Fellows speaks here in full before I return with my own commentary.

Developing a Culture of Close Looking

By Rebecca Mack

This journey began as many do: while looking for something else entirely. As one of the University of Vermont's 2013 Prospect Practitioner Fellows, I spent one intensive summer week using the Prospect School's methodology for learning from (i.e. assessment of) children's work and tracing the philosophic roots of their radical practices in the School and Center's archive.

While comparing changes in the syllabi of an annual professional development seminar held on the topic of human development over the lifespan, I bumped into what remains the only documentation I have found (though I suspect the culture of listening was pervasive) of the Descriptive Processes done in the classroom, by children. The piece, "Discussion of Change: Living, Growing, Dying Things" by Susan Donnelly and the West Group (1987-88) of 4 1/4 to 7 year-olds, is also unique because the children are not describing works of art or writing, but rather natural objects, works of nature. A longitudinal representation of open-ended inquiry, it is spare, potent and arresting. I felt

immediately challenged to repeat this simple pedagogical experiment with the even younger children in my preschool classroom. One cannot deny that serendipity is a guiding force in archival research. Having received my challenge, I returned to the hunt for human development over the lifespan, and to my classroom.

Our school, Burlington Children's Space, teaches and cares for children from infancy through preschool. Both preschool classrooms are two-year classrooms, teaching 3, 4, and 5-year-olds. We are located in an urban neighborhood in a small city on the eastern shore of Lake Champlain in Vermont. One Monday morning in November, I brought in some examples of different mosses and lichen from a weekend woodland adventure. We sat around a table together, taking turns observing and describing the specimens, while I transcribed the descriptions in a small notebook.

Moss Specimen #1

- I see grass and a little bit of wood chips.
- It feels like a dry fish in your hand.
- I notice it has leaves on it and it has flippers and wings.
- I notice that there is some hops and some grass and wood chips and flippers in it.
- I see this long stem has a little round seed at the top.
- This looks like it got white layer attached to it and it goes up and up and up when you pull on it. On the bottom it has a little dirt and grass.
- It smells like it has an injury. It will poke the animal's face when he smells it but it won't hurt.
- What I noticed is that I see very closely a grasshopper inside it.
- It looks like a little bit of moss. It feels like a pine tree.

It took a few more sessions of this practice to create a ritual of respectful listening, deep looking, formulating observations and using descriptive language to share them. The notebook, and the act of my writing, became central to the ritual; when I tried making an audio recording rather than transcribing, the group could not maintain focus. Once our practice was established, the children dictated a letter to me, asking their parents to help them find more specimens for description.

Dear Parents,

When you pick us up, we would like to find some creatures to bring in to school. Or a plant, like a bigger, bigger one, like this short. Please maybe in a jar. We want it because it's better to put it in.

We are going to use them because we are discovering things after naptime about plants and moss and animals. Could you try and find them for us? It doesn't have to be out in the woods, it just can be anywhere outside when you're walking. You might find something interesting. Like seashells or crab bones or if you're fishing maybe some fish's bone. Rocks are interesting maybe with moss on them.

....

No live animals, please, because they make such a mess and they might destroy the other specimens.

Thank you,

Blue Preschool

With those contributions, we continued the same practice for seven months, at which point we purchased a binocular stereoscope, and began to make comparative observations of the same specimens, without and then with the microscope.

Given that these were our oldest students, I became interested in what, if any, value there might be in using Prospect's language-based descriptive processes in the pre-verbal and emerging-verbal classrooms, a population not represented at the Prospect School. Bringing the question to the entire staff, we met in three consecutive professional development sections to describe Donnelly's documentation and discuss the possible pre-verbal applications. I summarized the emergent themes and brought them to the assembled staff during a fall in-service meeting.

We concluded that building a school culture of observation through descriptive language can certainly begin in an infant community; using the five senses as a basis for constructing knowledge. Babies and toddlers are experts in sensory exploration! Another key element of building this culture is time. Allowing as much time as a child needs to explore an object, facilitating multiple exposures, and using a ritual format (such as passing an object around in a circle), are ways to make use of time to the best advantage for our children to form their ideas through their own experience.

Recently, I visited the infant classroom with a shell, sitting down with three children and their teacher. I placed the shell on a cushion in the center of the circle and invited them to pick it up. Two children looked at the shell but did not approach. Marco picked it up, held it in a closed fist, handled it with both hands, handed it to me and walked away. One child continued to stare intently at it. The other, Aliyah, took the shell, rubbed it on her belly and lay down on top of it. She held it in a closed fist for quite some time. "What's in your hand? Can you show me?" the teacher asked. Aliyah put it down, picked it up again and replaced it in its original location. The third child, Zander, finally approached the shell after looking on while the others explored it. He picked it up, looked at me, and dropped it. The second time he held it for longer before dropping it. (It was unclear to me whether he was dropping it on purpose or losing his grip.) Marco came back, made a sign to take a turn (like turning the key in a car ignition), took the shell, ran his finger over it, pushed it into the cushion and ran his finger over it again. "You're noticing the ridges, I think. You keep running your finger over it," said the teacher. Marco ran his finger over it again and replaced it in its original location. Zander picked up the shell and tried to hand it to me but overshot. He retrieved it and tried again, landing it in my palm, and smiled broadly.

During this visit the children practiced taking turns observing the object, and I learned that they signal finishing their turn non-verbally by replacing it in the original location. I took the shell with me so that I could re-ignite the ritual the next time I visit. There is another shell of similar small size that has lived outdoors in our sandbox for a few months. This is a favorite treasure of the children in this classroom, who delight in rediscovering it over and over again. By repeating and ritualizing our processes of exploration, we build a consistent practice of observation and description with clear and

reliable expectations of listening and respect. Modeling descriptive language by paying attention *with* the children does more than teach a style of talk. It builds skills of observation within the observer, and gives respect to their interests, privileging the construction of knowledge from the inside out.

My working theory on the intertwined development of observational skills and descriptive language in both children and adults, individually and in community, was informed by this collective inquiry. Observation is the cognitive element of a sensory experience. It can be done alone. It can be done without words. Preverbal children observe and build the language to think or explain the observation at the same time; the receptive and generative cognitive processes intertwined. Noticing, like observing, reflects a relationship between an object or stimulus and an observer, with another twist. *Notice* has the same root as the word *note*: to make a record or communication. Noticing is a social observation, a step between observation and description. It is where the silent process of observation takes shape in verbal form. Description is the communication of the noted observation in language from observer to listener; it requires an audience either in person, or extemporally through written language. On this continuum, observational skills and descriptive language co-develop, both in the young mind, and even in older minds when we engage in collective epistemic inquiry, as with the Descriptive Processes.

Thanks to serendipity, Susan Donnelly, the Prospect School and Center, Burlington Children's Space, and the University of Vermont, I took a fruitful diversion in the Prospect Archive of Children's Work, along a path of building descriptive language in the preschool classroom, and through the resulting theoretical implications, finally connecting the work back to my original research on human development over the lifespan. I am at present compiling seven months of children's descriptions of natural objects into a richly illustrated book.

Staying with Complexity

By Jerusha Beckerman

I am a teacher in a public elementary school in New York City, and I have been working regularly with children for about seven years now, in a variety of school settings and across a wide range of age groups. I am lucky to teach in a school with a strong commitment to creating classrooms that are inclusive and supportive of the range of modes of thinking and learning of all children. We believe in building from children's strengths and interests and in providing as much opportunity as possible for children to have voice and choice in the ways they learn at school.

Last summer, I had the opportunity to participate in the Prospect Archives Fellowship. I had earned my Master's degree at the Sarah Lawrence College Art of Teaching program, where the philosophy and practices of Prospect are integral to the curriculum, and so I was somewhat familiar with the Archives in advance. Still, I was amazed and moved by how much deeper and more vast they were in person than what I had understood. The opportunity to freely explore these many years of lovingly preserved documentation of children and teachers was an honor and a gift, and to do so through the

use of Prospect's descriptive processes made it all the more valuable, rich, and sustaining.

Through our study of the Archives, we Fellows inquired deeply into all that can be understood about children and their learning through the close examination of the works they have made over time. By describing the strengths and interests made visible through an individual child's makings, we could make note of sustaining threads of meaning as they emerged and developed in these growing people. We deepened and strengthened our ways of seeing into the works that children create, providing for ourselves further entry into their learning, thinking, and being. This allowed us as teachers to consider how better to support the children in our own classrooms in their work and ways of working, and to see and know all children more fully. I carried this work back with me to my classroom as well as to my fellow educators, both in my own school and at a teacher inquiry group I am involved in run by Sarah Lawrence that includes teachers from across the NYC metropolitan area.

Looking at the Archives, especially the collections of children's works, helped reaffirm for me the importance of providing children with opportunities to pursue their own interests and develop their own strengths over all their years at school. In the school where I currently teach, each classroom's schedule includes some time we call Work Time, during which children are free to explore something entirely of their own choosing, born from their own interests in particular ideas or materials. With thoughtful support and careful provisioning from teachers, the children choose what questions they want to pursue during this time and how they will pursue them, whether through working with unit blocks or Legos, painting, sculpture, printmaking, sewing, weaving, cooking, writing, solving mathematical puzzles, taking apart defunct electronics, computer programming, observing classroom pets, engaging in dramatic play, or numerous other possibilities. The media available emerge from the particular group of children's interests and can shift from day to day. Sometimes children want to bring into this time a further exploration of something we have looked at together as a whole class. Sometimes one particular child's very specific interest in something becomes contagious and develops into a shared area of exploration for many children. Some children choose to pursue their wonderings through many varied media over time; others stick with one material and go deeper and deeper along the way. Each child brings herself uniquely to the world and to this kind of work. These bountiful variations in personhood are evident in the works children made at Prospect School and in any classroom where open-ended, child-driven work can take place. In my own classroom, I find Work Time and the sharing of work made during this time to be crucial for the children to become visible to each other and to me as their full selves. It is a primary way we welcome each and every child fully into the community of the classroom. It is how we get to know each other as thinkers and makers, how each child shares his or her strengths and expertise, how friendships and collaborations are formed and developed, and how the children learn to think deeply, express their questions, gather materials, solve problems, adjust expectations, compromise, challenge themselves, and grow.

A selection of the work that is made by the children in our school is collected at the end of each year and, as in the Prospect School, put into an archived portfolio kept

through all the children's years with us. Looking through the Prospect Archive of Children's Work last summer reminded me of what a vital piece this long-term collecting is. With the longitudinal view that is gained from gathering work over significant periods of time, it becomes especially clear how much children are capable of when they are engaged with ideas that matter to them and are given space and time to dig deeply into such ideas as they see fit, through their own self-standards. This authentic kind of learning looks different for all children and happens in its own time frame. It is often messy and sometimes comes in spurts, revisions and even reversions. It is not always readily apparent to the outsider, nor is it measurable, intertwined as it is with the complexity of each child and the abiding questions and themes she is drawn to.

As a society, we seem to fear this complexity. We refuse to acknowledge that the fullness of people and the meaning and value in their ideas and ways of being are not easily described in quick, digestible phrases and through narrow collections of data. We tend to look at, think and talk about the world within a very limited framework and ignore the rest. This framework then becomes a norm from which everything else deviates, and we are thus blinded to the infinite deviations that will always exist. In this way, we lose sight of the whole and the once-present value in its complexity vanishes. This way of thinking, drawn in education from, among other things, a deficit model of psychology, represents a problem that is vast and deep, and its effects are many and grow more and more sinister by the day. The pathology model aims to treat childhood as if it were an illness, to "cure" children through a prescribed program rather than to build meaningful environments and experiences for them based in the rich resources of the strengths and interests they each uniquely hold.

In order to develop authentic relationships and educative experiences with and for children, we must be able to see and know them in all their complexity. In order for children to be visible in this way, the classroom environment has to allow children to feel comfortable being who they are and must be provisioned with a breadth of media and materials that are inclusive of all. In a setting such as this, children feel valued and recognized, and they show themselves to us. They become comfortable with the struggle, ambiguity, and successes that real learning requires, and they take ownership of this struggle, knowing they are capable of discovering the world around them. As educators, then, we have the task of seeing them deeply, building our knowledge of each child through observations and documentation, and framing our teaching practice and curriculum around this knowledge. This kind of education is a dynamic, self-questioning process. I have seen how it can work to support all children, not only in my own classroom, but in many others. Every day, children become writers through the telling of stories and the making of drawings; they become readers through conversation with friends or through curiosity about a favorite animal or planet or machine. Children build on their capacity for critical thought and rigorous study through opportunities to follow their own deep interests and questions about the world. They are natural scientists, artists, builders, mathematicians—we have to trust in these capacities, and nurture them with patience and care.

Opportunities to do so are very difficult to find in most classrooms and schools as they stand today. Even in the school where I teach, where these values are firmly held, external pressures, including the implementation of the Common Core Standards and the pervasive reality of high-stakes testing, can undermine our ways of seeing and working with children. Far too often in schools today, instead of building from the deep knowledge that we educators have of the children under our care, we are pushing that knowledge aside and replacing it with something so much smaller, something contrived, condescending, and even misleading. When we narrow the focus of curriculum to preset standards that are created in isolation from particular children in particular schools, it is no wonder that so many children who are measured against these expectations come up short. It is no wonder that so many children do not succeed. We are pathologizing children and viewing the variety of their beings as defects, deviations from the norm, rather than seeing individual strengths to be understood and nurtured. This deficit model is not only disrespectful of children but also harmful to them, and it is certainly counterproductive to the future of our society, where variety of thought is our richest resource for innovation. To grow into contributing members of our democracy, all children deserve access to the opportunity to see themselves as thinkers and makers and to see school as a place where their questions, strengths and interests are not only seen but also respected and supported, and where they are given the space and time they deserve to create authentic and meaningful works.

Searching Language

By Lara Ramsey

As an elementary classroom teacher, I regularly use descriptive processes and protocols to review children's work and as a form of professional development with my colleagues. I participated in the UVM Prospect Archives Fellowship Program in the summer of 2012 in order to deepen my experience with descriptive processes and, in particular, to learn about the role of documentation, an essential component to the Prospect methodology.

Prior to the Fellowship, documentation had not been a consistent feature of my practice; I recorded and transcribed sessions when I was involved in specific research projects, but I did not understand how routinely documenting descriptive processes could add value to the experience. I wondered how documentation would change the experience of the descriptive process in the moment, and I wondered about the long view: what value would I find in reading archived transcripts of Prospect teachers' descriptive processes that are thirty or forty years old?

During the Fellowship, we used a variety of descriptive processes to look at a range of works, including Patricia Carini's (2001) writing, drawing and writing by Alva (a former Prospect School student), and a collection of Alva's Prospect School narrative records and parent reports over time. For each process, someone, not the facilitator, was appointed to take notes. This was modeled for me, explained to me, and I received coaching when I volunteered to try it.

Taking notes, knowing that the group would read them and that the notes would be archived, had a clear impact on the descriptive process experience. I felt myself summoned to a heightened awareness of attention, language, and responsibility. I was surprised to find that the note-taker influences the flow and dynamic of the groups' observations. For example, when the conversation moved quickly, I found myself asking participants to slow down or wait for me to capture the ideas in writing, and this expanded the quiet time between comments. Sometimes I found myself writing abbreviated notes that I would then review with the group to assure accuracy, which allowed for additional consideration of the ideas being recorded.

The clarifying conversation between note-taker and speaker clarifies both the note and the observation: "I didn't mean that she had rushed," a participant explained, in response to one of my notes, "I meant that the lines in her drawing had the *feeling* of a rush." I do not know whether I misinterpreted the speaker's comment or if she revised her idea upon hearing it read back to her, but I do not think the point of departure is important; either way, an idea about the work and its author was clarified and refined through the iterative process.

Descriptive processes compel participants to search for precise, original, non-judgmental language. Documentation, both the records I learned to keep and the records I researched in the Prospect Archives, helped me identify searching language as a meaningful feature of descriptive process conversational norms. By *searching language* I mean words or phrases such as, *I think, I mean, kind of, or maybe*: These words reveal that an idea is in the process of being formed and that the idea is being offered as a possibility, as opposed to a diagnosis. I heard searching language when I took notes on a participant explaining, "I've been trying to think of why I want to describe Alva's language as 'colorful', and the best I can think of is, her verbs are 'scrubbing,' 'ducking,' and 'changing.' Maybe these seem like less common verbs, or maybe it's that they end in -ing." The speaker used the words *think* and *maybe* twice; one can almost see his ideas about the author developing as he considers the written text.

Searching for language to describe what one has noticed in a piece of work is qualitatively different from searching student work for traits that are specified as key or benchmarks according to a pre-existing rubric. Searching language is a companion to emergent theories about works and their authors, while other forms of assessment language tend to be diagnostic. I appreciate the efficiency of a strong, well-developed rubric when I do assessments on student work in my classroom, yet the Fellowship has helped me keep in mind that what we see inevitably depends on the lens we look through. The Descriptive Process is a unique lens that allows for emergent theories.

In addition to taking straightforward notes, I learned about a Prospect tool called the *integrative restatement*. Integrative restatements are summaries that the chairperson makes, periodically, to distill and organize what participants have noticed and described so far. This sort of summary reflects patterns, trends or tensions emerging from the participants' comments. Since the comments have been grounded in specific observations, the patterns, trends, and tensions are pertinent to the work and to the author

of the work as well. The integrative restatement says nothing wholly new, but by restating and suggesting emergent themes that may not have been previously recognized, integrative restatements help the group see what has been seen and hear what has been heard anew.

In the two years since I participated in the UVM Prospect Archives Fellowship Program, I have incorporated note-taking and integrative restatements into my classroom teaching and my professional development work. Documentation, I realize, makes it possible to notice subtle or unanticipated consistencies, inconsistencies, and change. I have adopted a greater trust and interest in contradictions that I notice in my students' work; I am less afraid that a report containing contradictions will be seen as flawed and more committed to not overlooking potential anomalies, exceptions, and examples that may be windows into a child's growth and development.

By practicing the role of note-taker, I realized that documenting descriptive processes is another way of supporting the very things I already focused on as a facilitator, such as helping participants hone skills of observation and practice seeing work while suspending judgment. The group of teachers with whom I practice a descriptive process on a monthly basis began sharing the role of note-taker regularly. We know that the documentation process supports our close attention to student work, our ability to reflect on our language, and our appreciation for patterns, trends, and tensions. We also believe that if we re-search our own documented conversations at the end of the year, five years, or 10, we will be able to lift out emergent themes of our own process and continue to refine our practice accordingly.

Multiple Stories, Multiple Threads

As is evident in these three accounts, what grabs each Practitioner Fellow, and where it leads in her teaching, is unique to the person and setting. What is shared is a commitment to what is possible if children are seen in all their complexity. As Lara points out, children, and, I would add, all people, are full of contradictions, and the role of the teacher isn't to smooth those, to make the child fit a "single story," but rather to see the child as fully as possible, knowing that there will always remain something unseen, inviting another look. Lara's "greater trust and interest in contradictions ... in [her] students' work" is no small thing. It counters the impulse--particularly strong just now—to rationalize, to codify, and to simplify at the expense of seeing the child for who she is.

I use the phrase "*single story*" here with reference to a TED talk by the novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009), called "The Danger of a Single Story." Adichie is talking about cultures, and the understanding that is lost when the variety that comprises any culture—including the differing perspectives of each individual within a culture—is reduced to one version. Adichie discovers that she is not, in her word, "legible" to a U.S. roommate and professor because she doesn't fit their version of the African story. Later, on a trip to Mexico, to her own shame, Adichie finds herself surprised to see Mexicans going about their daily business. At that moment she realizes that she has been taken in by the media's version of the Mexican as "abject immigrant." Lara, in her willingness to

entertain “anomalies” and “exceptions,” alongside more predictable patterns for a child, makes space for each child to comprise multiple stories. Work Time serves a similar function in Jerusha’s classroom, creating a time in the day when she can discover both consistencies and surprises in her children’s approaches to learning.

The descriptions of natural objects by Rebecca’s children are one part of a day that includes ample opportunities for play, choice, and exploration both in the classroom and outdoors. Reading Rebecca’s account, I can’t help thinking about the discourse permeating so many early childhood programs, especially those that serve large numbers of children in poverty, as does the Burlington Children’s Space. Often the focus is on teaching “pre-reading skills” and on “language development,” with the assumption that the children, especially poor children, are somehow deficient in language. Rebecca’s trust in the ability of her nursery schoolers to observe and describe moss brought forth descriptions not unlike those of older children or even adults. Rebecca’s young students use specific language, liken the feel of the moss to a dead fish or a pine tree, and imagine what will happen if an animal should try to smell the moss.

At the same time, Rebecca and her colleagues are working on, as she puts it, “building a school culture of observation through descriptive language.” Discoveries are made along the way: Notebook recordings work better than audio for helping the young children stay focused; preverbal children observe and communicate bodily. Rebecca says that this work with the children “[privileges] the construction of knowledge from the inside out.” The same is true for the work she and her staff are doing. Each child’s comment or physical observation, duly noted, becomes one small piece in the growing body of knowledge being built about that child.

Looking at what was possible for children at Prospect who were given long stretches of time to work with materials of their own choosing reaffirmed Jerusha’s commitment to what her school calls Work Time—and to being sure that she was provisioning for a wide range of children’s interests and questions. As a 2/3 teacher in a public school, she and her children are subject to the tests that are used to sort and classify children. Her comment that “. . . the fullness of people and the meaning and value in their ideas and ways of being are not easily described in quick, digestible phrases and through narrow collections of data,” resonates with Lara’s thoughts about the limitations of rubrics. I am reminded, too, of the “data team meetings” that appeared during my last few years of teaching. They replaced something that had been called Child Study. Though that was hardly the in-depth study associated with Prospect’s Descriptive Review of the Child, it was also not number crunching. At data team, where I was supposed to bring children I was concerned about, the focus was on things like DIBELS scores, progress monitoring (more scores), and reading levels.

Work Time provides opportunities for children, and it also provides an important window for the teacher. In order to teach each child from his or her strengths and interests, teachers need a way to see what those strengths and interests are. Any opportunity for children to make choices, whether a Work Time such as Jerusha has or more limited choices within a given curriculum, furnishes the teacher a chance to see

what draws each child and *how* each child approaches materials and learning opportunities. This, then, can provide a sturdy foundation for teaching that starts not with deprivation or deficits, but with each child as a person with capacities ripe for stimulation.

Jerusha sees teaching as relational: "In order to develop authentic relationships and educative experiences with and for children, we must be able to see and know them in all their complexity." Human relationships are based on connection and recognition, not on scores and standards. The materials and choices Jerusha makes available to her children enable her to respond to each child's interests and strengths, to *get to know* each child. Children, like adults, are more apt to trust in another person when they feel *seen*, recognized for what ignites their passion. I'm sure that Jerusha, like every teacher, has had students with particular challenges in learning. Basing her relationships with children in her recognition of them as complex persons creates a foundation for working on what is often called the hard stuff.

All three of these accounts are about the value of paying close attention to children and to teaching practice. Interestingly, note-taking turned out to be important in two quite different accounts. Rebecca's on-the-spot transcription, not audio recording, fostered attentiveness on the part of her young children. At a different point on the age spectrum, Lara discovered that note-taking in her teacher inquiry group "supports our close attention to student work, our ability to reflect on our language, and our appreciation for patterns, trends, and tensions." I would add that in attending to children in this way one *sees differently*. A pattern, a tension, a contrast within a child raises questions: What is going on here? What more might I look at to understand more fully? What does this tell me about working with the child? That is quite a different stance from one in which children are labeled, and hence seen, in terms of their presumed deficits, often determined by criteria distant from any individual child.

A key idea in the philosophy of education developed at Prospect is that all of us, by virtue of being human, are as mysterious as we are understandable. We respond to experience in novel as well as predictable ways; we catch ourselves and others by surprise, and in so doing discover new things about the world and our relationship with it. For this reason, attempts to understand people by diagnosis or label will invariably fall short. Rubrics, though intended less to diagnose than to evaluate, run the risk of drawing a box around a child or piece of work. I am struck by Lara's comment: "... there is always more to see if one looks without a frame." While not rejecting rubrics out of hand, she opens the door to seeing aspects of a child's work occluded by a rubric or any other generalized device, such as a continuum or checklist.

Of course the work of a teacher is not merely to see more; it is to put insights to use in the classroom. This might mean a slight shift of emphasis or action, with discoveries made along the way: transcription—not audio recording—as an essential part of the young children's collaborative descriptions of natural objects. Sometimes a seemingly small change can open up big possibilities for a child. Ann Caren recounts one such episode in "Paying Attention to Justin" (Martin & Schwartz, 2014). A support

teacher in Ann's classroom noticed that adults were responding to Justin's difficulties with math by rushing in to help him, and asked, "How can he work on his own with so many people checking in to help him?" (Martin & Schwartz, 2014, p. 131). In response, the adults working in Ann's class make a plan to help Justin develop more independence. Around the same time, Ann notices Justin's interest in drawing and has her class of second graders describe a piece of his writing. Two small actions, one might say, but over the course of the year, Justin gradually develops more confidence in his own abilities and discovers that he can use his strength in drawing to convey his mathematical thinking.

Building on children's strengths doesn't mean ignoring their vulnerabilities. It does mean seeing vulnerabilities as part of the human condition, rather than as deficiencies associated with biological (brain-based) or socio-economic ("cultural deprivation" or the "culture of poverty") causes. It is to grant the children we teach the same full humanity we experience in our own lives and those of our loved ones. It is a political act, even if written on a small canvas—that of the classroom or school. To refuse the language of deficiency is to insist that *all* people, children and teachers alike, experience our lives as multiple stories. To refuse the language of deficiency is to heed Adichie's warning about the danger of a single story.

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¹ This refers to the way each multiage group of children was coming together at the start of the school year: the social dynamics, emerging interests that the teacher could pick up on in planning curriculum, materials and themes that were compelling.

² For a fuller sense of the range of this extensive archive, view the Finding Aid at <http://cdi.uvm.edu/findingaids/collection/prospect.ead.xml>.