Knowledge, inquiry, action: Teacher collaboration at Prospect Center’s Summer Institute

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KNOWLEDGE, INQUIRY, ACTION: TEACHER COLLABORATION
AT PROSPECT CENTER'S SUMMER INSTITUTE

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
Education

September, 2003
This dissertation has been examined and approved.

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DEDICATION

To Andy
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ABSTRACT

KNOWLEDGE, INQUIRY, ACTION: TEACHER COLLABORATION AT PROSPECT CENTER'S SUMMER INSTITUTE

By

Karen H. Woolf

University of New Hampshire, September 2003

This two-year study describes the work of approximately thirty educators, kindergarten/post-secondary, who attend the Summer Institute on Descriptive Inquiry and November Conference under the auspices of The Prospect Archive and Center for Education and Research in North Bennington, Vermont. The purpose of this study is to portray the experience of collaborative inquiry using Prospect Center's descriptive processes.

Teacher network groups generally center around specific content areas such as language arts or science. In contrast, Prospect Center is an independent national network of educators committed to guided observation and disciplined description as a grounding for teaching practice and inquiry. Generated by participants, on-going content for the Summer Institute includes descriptions of children and their works, readings in literature and philosophy, and sessions devoted to issues of practice.
An account of the Institute is developed through narrative description of formal
descriptive review sessions and daily interactions of participants. Ethnographic group
and individual interviews reveal how the ideas and relationships formed during the
Institute continue to influence the personal and professional lives of participants.
Verbatim data, such as transcriptions of conversations and sessions convey the nature of
the Institute. Participants’ published works, unpublished papers, journal entries, letters
and e-mails provided another source of data for this study. As a participant in Summer
Institutes for over twenty years, I draw own my own knowledge and experience as well.

Conclusion: The collaborative processes developed by Prospect Center support a
variety of perspectives and a respect for differences, which, along with a descriptive and
inquiring stance, help teachers deepen their understanding of what it means to educate,
enabling them to better advocate for their students. This descriptive account of
collaborative inquiry in an independent network contributes an alternative perspective to
teacher development for experienced as well as novice teachers.
INTRODUCTION

The Research Question

Early afternoon light illuminates the circle of expectant faces. Almost everyone present has driven four to seven hours in the July heat and humidity to attend Prospect Center’s Summer Institute on Descriptive Inquiry, a study group that gathers each year at Bennington College. They listen to one another’s brief accounts of the past school year. Responses range from an empathetic glance to exuberant laughter. One person doodles on her note pad, while another jots down notes. When late arrivals slip into the classroom, participants look up and smile, then quietly move their desk chairs to fit them in. After everyone around the circle has spoken, the director of the Institute begins a summary of their work together from the previous summer. She reminds them of the continuing threads of interest while previewing new directions for this summer’s inquiry. Old friends exchange smiles across the room as they relax into the familiar rhythm and pace of Summer Institute.

This is a typical scene of educators at the beginning of Summer Institute. Lasting two weeks, the Summer Institute on Descriptive Inquiry has a specific focus each year. The Major Seminar in the morning is traditionally structured to address the framing questions of the Institute through a longitudinal child study, a reading in common, and literature discussion groups. Afternoon and evening sessions are organized to assist participants with their individual projects as they meet in small groups to describe a child,
a sample of work, or think about an aspect of practice, an issue, or research-in-progress. (Application Form, 2003).

A strong core group of returning participants with progressive educational and social aims has been a significant factor in fostering and sustaining this community of educators. Operating as a cooperatively run study group, the Summer Institute on Descriptive Inquiry is not affiliated with a college or university. It is notable for the unusual range of professional levels of its participants, extending from pre-kindergarten through university.

After more than two decades of attending the Institute I began to wonder what drew all of us to this place summer after summer for such hard intellectual work. To help answer this question I decided to make the Summer Institute the object of academic research. First I volunteered to solicit, and then temporarily house, the growing collection of published books and articles written by members of Prospect Center that either evolved out of, or referred to, our work during the Summer Institutes. Eventually, the primary focus of this research became the lived experience of the participants of the Institute as they engaged in using Prospect Center’s descriptive review process. What is the experience of living in this democratic community with its strong commitment to building on differences? What meaning does it hold for individuals so that they continue to return? My hope is to make the complex and internal process of collaborative thinking as it occurs in the Institute and the November Conference both visible and understandable to the reader.

Throughout the two years I was engaged with this study, I struggled with the methodological issues inherent in conducting research in a group in which I was a long-
time participant turned observer and researcher. James Clifford (1990) proposes that positioning oneself as a participant and as a researcher in academia involves “tactically shifting insides and outsides, affiliations and distances . . . a distance challenged, blurred and relationally reconstructed,” and he continues, “rooted in community and routed through academia” (pp. 81-82). I am indeed rooted in the Prospect community, but this research allowed me to gather up the experiences and the knowledge accrued in both settings in order to portray the lived experience of teachers as thinkers and researchers in a manner that I may broaden, deepen, and refine rather than categorize, reduce, and define.

In this dissertation I employ a range of phenomenological approaches, ethnographic field work, and personal narrative (Carini, 1975; Denton, 1974; Jackson, 1996; Peshkin, 1988; Seidman, 1998; Van Manen, 1990; Wolcott, 1994). To help narrow my generalized focus of portraying the Summer Institute on Descriptive Inquiry from the “inside” I draw on the extensive study of teacher networks conducted by Ann Lieberman and Maureen Grolnick (1996). Two participant observer studies which depict of teachers working together outside a school setting, one by Karen Gallas (1998) and the other by Bonnie Sunstein (1994), provide models of how to write about the Summer Institute. The notion of “knowledge in practice” found in the collaborative works of Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan L. Lytle (1993, 1999) helped to orient my depictions of afternoon and evening small group work.

Rather than asking the “why” of participating in this Summer Institute, or looking for generalizable structural features, I use phenomenological methods to explicate and portray what it means to be a participant in a way which does not negate the lived world.
of that person. I aim to “avoid the normative force of an a priori definition” (Denton, 1974). Since I have attended most of the Institutes since 1978, my experience provides a kind of knowledge and insight that would not be as apparent and or as easily accessible to an “outsider” who might study the Institute. There are obvious methodological considerations which must be taken into account due to my long-standing affiliation with Prospect Center’s Summer Institutes, and I address these in more in detail within the dissertation in Chapter One. In this study the locus for understanding the world of Summer Institute is from within that community (Gluck & Patai, 1991; Greene, 1994; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990).

Because this study investigates collaborative inquiry around ideas and topics generated by the participants, I chose to use a phenomenological approach because it is one that can portray the interplay of individual perspective, memory, and personal and group history that occurs in descriptive review sessions. According to Patricia Carini (1975) “phenomenological inquiry increasingly thickens the meaning of the phenomenon as it reveals the multiplicity of internal reciprocities that constitute the phenomenon’s integrity” (p. 11). Through layers of careful description, my intent is to depict the multiplicity of perspectives and ambiguities, that, when examined and rearranged, give rise to new ideas which, in turn, shape the focus of the next description. This approach is essentially the application of ordinary human perception. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) notes

This phenomenal field is not an ‘inner world’, the ‘phenomenon’ is not a ‘state of consciousness’, or a ‘mental fact’, and the experience of phenomena is not an act of introspection or an intuition. . . . The sensible configuration of an object or a gesture. . . .is not grasped in some inexpressible coincidence, it
‘is understood’ through a sort of act of appropriation which we all experience when we say that we have ‘found’ the rabbit in the foliage of a puzzle, or that we have ‘caught’ a slight gesture (p. 58).

According to John Creswell (1998) after an “exhaustive description of phenomenon” (p. 67) the reader should be able to say at the end, so that is what it is like to attend Prospect Center’s Summer Institute and November Conference. In such an approach to understanding the researcher is “rewarded not by ‘useful knowledge’ nor answers nor solutions but by increased meaning—his own and that of the phenomenon in which he has placed his thought” (Carini, 1975, p. 41).

History of the Institute

In 1965, Patricia Carini, along Louis Carini, Marion Stroud, and Joan Blake founded the Prospect School in North Bennington, Vermont, an independent alternative school based on a strong commitment to informal education, mixed age groups, choices for children, and John Dewey’s ideas of “experiences that lead on.” A teacher certification program began in 1969. By the early seventies, the staff of the school was interested in finding ways to maintain an examined practice. They began by initiating the documentation of children’s growth and learning through the observation and systematic collection of their works.

Before the Summer Institutes began, small groups of teachers interested in refining and implementing ways of closely looking at student’s work came to North Bennington during the summer to study with Patricia Carini and the teachers at the Prospect School. They were particularly interested in using description to disclose the thinking and ideas in the works of children. Carini (1986) conceives of works as “a way of making, forming, discovering and disclosing meanings and ideas” (p. 11). As these...
descriptive processes evolved, they led, in turn, to the articulation of procedures for staff
development and alternative methods for documenting children's growth and learning.
The structure of those early teacher gatherings in the summer became more formalized
when Pat Carini offered the first three-week Institute for approximately twenty-five
people in 1978. From its inception, Summer Institute was collaborative, and teachers
were expected to bring their own research projects.

The larger entity of the Prospect Archive and Center for Education and Research
was created in 1979, beginning a period of grant-funding that lasted nearly seven years.
The Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation, along with the grants from the Rockefeller Brothers
funded the Summer Institutes until 1986. In the early eighties, grants from the Noyes
Foundation and the Bush Foundation facilitated the creation of a selected archive of work
from thirty-six students from Prospect School. The Prospect Archive is presently a
source of materials for research, teacher education courses, and the Summer Institutes. It
contains over 250,000 pieces and represents a span of approximately twenty years.

While the school eventually closed in 1991, due to the recession of the late
eighties, The Prospect Archive and Center for Education and Research continues to be
housed in North Bennington, Vermont. A board of directors meets regularly to oversee
the annual Summer Institutes in North Bennington and New York City, and the annual
November Conference in Litchfield, Connecticut. They are also responsible for the
publication of the biannual, *Prospect Review*. Presently the Prospect Center is involved
in sponsoring a series of publications around descriptive practices. Although Patricia
Carini is no longer the director, she remains a strong intellectual presence in the work of
Prospect Center. Along with Margaret Himley, she co-edited a book that was
collaboratively written by members of Prospect Center, illustrating how descriptive processes are used in schools. Recently she completed a book of her talks (Himley & Carini, 2000; Carini, 2001).

The Summer Institute on Descriptive Inquiry

Patricia Carini considered the “centrality of ideas” to be the foundation of the Institute and supported participants’ sustained inquiry through reading, description, and reflection. Her own interests were in the writings of Owen Barfield, M. Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger, Ernst Cassirer, Alfred North Whitehead, John Berger, Isaiah Berlin, and Raymond Williams, among others. During the Institutes, these writings were woven together with Descriptive Reviews of children and their works, readings in literature, and personal and professional recollective narratives. She valued teacher’s stories, noting that they “percolated through educational practice and embody ideas and ideals.” Carini once spoke of the Summer Institutes as a “sort of grand, educational experiment,” a statement predicated on her belief in the capacity of all teachers to grapple with “large ideas.”

Although Cecelia Traugh is now the director, the nature of the Institute remains essentially the same. After outside grant funding ended in 1987, the responsibilities for running the Institute and its structure were reconfigured to reflect the nature of a cooperative study group. The morning seminars, planned out by Cecelia Traugh together with Pat Carini, draw on the notes taken during the collaborative work of the previous summer along with suggestions from participants. The content in the morning continues to incorporate substantive readings within the Institute’s focusing topic, followed by teacher-initiated small groups in the afternoon relating to practice.
Working together, this community of thinkers has created a common continuity of ideas and practices that, over time, have had considerable implications for their work in classrooms as well as for their personal lives. Kenneth Bruffee (1999) sees this kind of non-foundational construction of knowledge as an instance when “each authoritative community, each community of interdependent knowledgeable peers . . . constructs knowledge in the distinctive, local language or paralinguistic symbolic system that constitutes the community” (p. 153).

**Descriptive Inquiry Processes**

Inquiry at Prospect is centered in talk. Systematic, reflective conversations referred to as “review processes,” frame a variety of investigations around classroom practice. Margaret Himley (2000) in writing about the oral inquiry processes used at Prospect, notes that, “Dialogue is an embodied epistemological experience, and that meaning and knowledge are not locked into language, but emerge at the intersection between gesture, bodily experience and linguistic practice. For that reason it is difficult to translate fully oral inquiry into text” (p. 203). As an extension of Himley’s dialogic approach, I chose to layer narrative transcriptions with description and first-person accounts to create vignettes of individuals working together in review process sessions.

According to Prospect Center, “the processes carry within them important premises and values . . . that assume that all children--indeed, all people,--have the capacity to learn and to make a contribution” (Prospect Center, 2001, p. 4). All the inquiry processes share common rules and roles for both the chairperson and participants in order to make them “democratic and inclusive, and for guaranteeing respect and privacy for the individuals involved” (Ibid.).
Descriptive Review of a Child

When participants want to learn more about the particular strengths of a child or young adolescent, they use the Descriptive Review of a Child. According to Carini (2000), “The aim of this collaborative inquiry is to make visible, through disciplined description, the process of how each child goes about learning. The purpose is to tailor learning to the child, facilitating the integration of observation and recording directly into practice” (p. 9).

In advance of the Review, the chairperson and the presenter work closely together to frame a focus and to organize the presentation. Through a series of preparation questions, a teacher is guided to observe and describe a child in the following areas: physical presence and gesture; disposition and temperament; connections with others; strong interests and preferences; and modes of thinking and learning. The portrayal is meant to be non-judgmental, non-evaluative, and grounded in illustrative examples.

The Descriptive Review begins with the teacher presenting an uninterrupted detailed portrait of the child to her colleagues. During the questioning period that follows, the chairperson maintains an emphasis on description within the focusing question of the Review. Questions that arise from interpretations according to a particular theoretical framework, such as stage or personality theory, are discouraged because “the knowledge that emerges from a review is always situated and partial, always open, never finished or finalized” (Prospect Center, 2002). After the chairperson restates the focusing question, the Review ends with a period of participant recommendations that address the student’s perceived strengths.
Descriptive Review of Children’s Works

This review process is often used in conjunction with the Descriptive Review of a Child. The chair and the presenter generally select a representative piece from a body of work by one child, such as a drawing or a story, in order to fill out a picture of a student. According to Carini (1986), all works reveal the “continuity of a person conceived as a self-coherent whole . . . mirrored in the conceptualization of work” (p. 12). Beginning with general impressions, participants speak in turn around a circle as they describe the work in succeeding layers, attending to the dimensions of style, tone, rhythm and form. The chair periodically summarizes participants’ comments, restating the patterns that emerge, and noting complementarities and divergences in order to disclose as many of the aspects of the work as possible (Ibid.).

In a recently released Prospect Center guide to their collaborative processes, the table of contents lists over nine additional processes that can be used to describe a classroom, a school, an issue of practice, and text, to name a few. Most processes share a common structure and characteristics, such as a chairperson, presenter with a focusing question, participants seated in a circle who speak in turn without interruption, periodic summaries, and a note-taker. According to the introduction in the guide written by Margaret Himley (2002), the 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 (p.3)
The Nature of Collaborative Inquiry: ‘Alongside’

While there are many accounts of collaborative inquiry (Berthoff, 1987a; Blythe, Allen, & Powell, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 1994; DiPardo, 1999; Duckworth, 1987; Horton & Freire, 1990; Lieberman & Miller, 1999; Oja, Diller, Corcoran, & Andrew, 1993; Weber, 1997), most are situated in institutional settings or have institutional affiliations. Prospect Center, however, has no school or university affiliation and defines itself as a “self-governing, collaborative study group.” Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle (1990, 1993, 1999) have written extensively about teacher knowledge, citing Prospect Center’s review processes as an example of how teachers can support one another in examined practice. Margaret Himley (1991) in her book, Shared Territory, examines the work of Patricia Carini in the context of Bakhtin’s social theory of language.

As a recipient of a MacArthur/Spencer Grant, Karen Gallas (1998) documented a collaborative study group of elementary teachers as they met after school twice a month, over two years, to use Prospect Center’s descriptive review processes. In her ethnographic study she situates herself as a co-researcher in order to contrast the nature of the study group with that of the school district’s professional development program. Gallas’s major research question was: “What are the conditions, both within the school and within the respective groups, that sustain and encourage regular, long term participation?” (p. 3). Building on the work of Karen Gallas, I chose to use a phenomenological approach to portray the participants of Summer Institute, a group of educators from a broad professional range representing pre-school through university who teach in a variety of locations throughout the country. My question relates more to
the lived experience of their long term participation in a residential setting and their use of descriptive review processes: "What is the experience of attending the Summer Institute on Descriptive Inquiry, both as an individual and as a member of collaborative study group?"

During the course of my research, I rarely heard participants themselves use the words, "collaboration" or "collaborative." Instead, I became increasingly aware of how frequently I came across the word, ‘alongside’ in the transcripts of formal sessions as well as conversations. The term eventually emerged for me as a key concept for the working style of the Summer Institutes.

The notion of alongside, in the pedagogical sense, comes from several sources. Lillian Weber was the former director of the Workshop Center at City College in New York. She and Patricia Carini often talked and worked together over the years. In her work, Weber often refers to "joining with" and "following after," concepts similar to "alongside." She stresses the importance of the teacher seeing the child's centrality as definitive, yet she feels that the adult should share a "lifetime of interests, joining with children's' interests, and then weaving the thread openly and obviously and at a pace that doesn't cut out and leave stranded those interests" (p. 170). She also writes in similar terms about her work with students, as well as experienced teachers, at the Workshop Center.

When she began the Summer Institutes, Patricia Carini worked alongside teachers sharing her knowledge of phenomenological methodology and supporting their developing skills in descriptive inquiry. Cecelia Traugh speaks of working alongside teachers during her educational seminars, and credits New York City educator, Barbara
Batton, with applying the term to depict the manner in which people work with one another, and with ideas.

In ordinary usage, alongside is used to describe small daily acts in classrooms, and homes. Used during Summer Institutes, it implies a non-hierarchical relationship, inviting observation, comparison, and questioning. In seminars or inquiry process sessions, participants from all professional levels sit alongside one another in a circle; teachers speak of working alongside their students; the schedule of the Institute is deliberately structured so that assigned readings in literature and philosophy are set alongside one another, each meant to inform the other; these readings are put alongside spanning child studies; and personal recollections and stories, when put alongside one another, offer diverse perspectives on shared human experiences. Working in this manner is both democratic and collaborative.

Dissertation Overview

Chapter One: Since I have participated in the Summer Institute on Descriptive Inquiry for over twenty years and have been co-faculty for the Summer Institute on Descriptive Process for newcomers four times, I explore the methodological and philosophical implications of being a researcher in a familiar setting. Margaret Himley (2000) in writing about the complexities of this kind of research says it best: “The point in this approach to knowledge is to study individuals ‘in the act of learning’ and all that implies about drama, action, and motion” (p. 129).

Chapter Two: Newcomers learn about and practice the descriptive inquiry processes during the five-day Summer Institute on Descriptive Process taught by voluntary instructors. This chapter depicts my experience of co-teaching this Institute
with two other faculty drawn from the Institute on Descriptive Inquiry. I portray a small
group of new participants as they become familiar with the review processes in the
context of an in-depth, spanning child study. Using children's files from the Prospect
Archive, including weekly teacher records, they situate their study child in a whole
school context. Gradually they come to appreciate the value of keeping detailed narrative
observations over time as they follow the child from kindergarten through eighth grade.

On the last day and a half of the Institute, participants are depicted attending
sessions of their choosing where they have the opportunity to apply their new skills in
describing to children's work from their own classrooms. Since participants must attend
the Summer Institute on Descriptive Process before they can register for the Institute on
Descriptive Inquiry, the history and the nature of the relationship between the two
Institutes is also briefly addressed.

Chapter Three: In this chapter a vignette portrays participants as they begin a
session of Close Reading by discussing passages from an essay by Isaiah Berlin. The
chapter ends with a depiction of the final small group session of the Institute. Beginning
with a period of quiet study as individuals review their notes, I describe how participants
then address the relationships of the ideas and themes from the Major Seminar to those
generated from the afternoon teacher research sessions. The readings from the Institute
are unusually wide ranging, and their accumulated collection has provided a rich source
of ideas about the world and humanity that enlarges the ways in which participants think
about their practice. The process of Close Reading, as it is applied by Prospect Center to
describe and interpret texts, is analogous to the descriptive processes introduced in
Chapter Two.
Chapter Four begins with a vignette of individuals preparing for a Close Reading of Alfred North Whitehead’s, *Modes of Thought*. A second vignette follows describing a small group of participants engaged in an exercise that explores, through the medium of drawing, the relationship between non-verbal and oral description using Whitehead’s notion of “expression.” Their focus is on capturing the gesture or “expression” in a feather. I depict participants alternating between drawing and oral description. Afterwards they meet to discuss their perceptions of description, inquiry, and interpretation. They discover how a descriptive stance keeps open the possibilities for questions and relates to their classroom practice.

Chapter Five: It is difficult to describe children and adolescents engaged in mathematics work, but five teachers who have an interest in pursuing this topic meet to read through an article that one of them has written about her classroom. During their session they also take the time to look at a sample of work done by one of the children depicted in the article. The delicacy in chairing a group of this small size, particularly when the presenter is one’s former coordinating teacher, is enhanced by adhering to the formal structure of the descriptive inquiry process.

This chapter is multi-layered and nested. I begin by describing the collaborative inquiry of a small group, nested within the larger context of the Institute, during which they discuss the draft of an article. Within the article is a section about the mathematical activities of one child, after which they go on to further describe a sample of a the same child’s work. The participants are shown using the content of the session, the article and the work sample, to think about and address the larger issue of good practice in mathematics instruction, along with the difficulty of portraying students engaged in it.
My larger purpose in selecting this portrayal is to show how the Institute’s collaborative spirit fosters personal and professional support for participants’ examined practice.

Chapter Six is a brief overview of how the works of Owen Barfield and Raymond Williams have influenced the use of key words in the Institute. The overview is followed by a vignette illustrating a process that evolved early on, Reflection on a Keyword. A Reflection is often used before a Review in order to “deepen the context for the work,” but the process can also stand by itself (Prospect, 2002, p. 34). In this instance the Keyword is “transition,” selected by Brian, who offered to chair this evening session.

Chapter Seven: The setting for this chapter is the annual Prospect Center November Conference in Litchfield, Connecticut. The inquiry that frames the conference is often topical and relates to larger educational policy issues. The focus for this particular conference, “Play, Choice and Making Works,” arose out of teachers’ growing frustration with increasing mandates generated by high stakes testing. Newcomers are welcomed, and experienced participants have an opportunity to present in descriptive inquiry sessions.

The second part of this chapter is an in-depth account of my presentation, of James, chaired by Pat Carini. James, a child in my classroom, was selected because he was a reluctant reader with noticeable strengths in art and project-based activities. A Descriptive Review of a Child requires a significant amount of advance preparation. This account depicts how the presenter and chair work closely together to shape a Review around a focusing question that provokes questions about expectations, choice, standards, and reading in general.
Chapter Eight is a series of five Recollections that were gathered during the last of four small group sessions exploring the history of the Institutes. Some members of the group were relative newcomers (ten years) while others had attended since 1978. I asked them to recall one collaborative session that continued to stand out to them over time and to expand on what they found to be particularly memorable. Their individual accounts reveal a range of interests and preferences. To assist the reader, individual narratives are situated in a brief outline of each recalled Institute along with biographical information about the participant. I briefly comment on the larger ideas within each account, calling attention to the reciprocity between the ongoing personal or professional inquiry of the individual and the larger community of the Institute.

The names of the participants in this dissertation, except for Patricia Carini, Cecelia Traugh, Barbara Batton, and Abbe Futterman, are pseudonyms.
CHAPTER ONE

RESEARCH APPROACH

Doing phenomenology is like coming to a movie in the middle. To understand the movie, we need to ask questions like this: What is this story about? Where did it begin? What are the significant parts and what are the insignificant? To answer these questions at a movie we only need to go back to the beginning. With life it is a little more difficult.

Loren Barritt
*Researching Educational Practice*, p. 23

Because this dissertation is an investigation of the phenomenon of collaborative inquiry, I use a mostly phenomenological approach to portray participants as they experience the interplay of perspective, memory, and history through collaborative inquiry. According to Loren Barritt (1985), “A phenomenological approach is one that fixes on conscious experience and tries to understand how it happens and what it means” (p. 31). Drawing on interviews, conversations and the recollections of participants, as well as my own, my goal is to portray the experience as it was for particular individuals living through it. (Ibid., p.61). Using phenomenological description, narrative, and story, I also explore the “meaning structures beyond what is immediately experienced by the participants of the Summer Institute (Van Manen, 1990, p. 152).

Collecting data in a cultural context in which I have been a long time participant has meant a temporary shift to the perimeter of the group. Depicting and interpreting how teachers experience collaborative inquiry during Prospect’s Summer Institutes and November Conference, I have had to examine my own perspectives and biases as a researcher. Clifford (1990) proposes that positioning oneself as a participant, and as a researcher, is a valuable method for gaining insight into the experiences of others.
researcher in academia, involves “tactically shifting insides and outsides, affiliations and
distances...a distance challenged, blurred and relationally reconstructed,” and he
continues, “rooted in community and routed through academia” (pp. 81-82). As a long-
time participant, I have deep roots in the Prospect community, but choosing an academic
route through this research has enlarged my understanding of teachers working together
in ways that I would not have otherwise experienced.

This dissertation portrays the work of a group of teachers who, during Prospect
Center’s Summer Institute, employ an evolving phenomenological approach shaped by
the work of Patricia Carini who cites the philosophical writings Martin Heidegger,
Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Alfred North Whitehead as being especially influential,
along with other writers such as Loren Eisely, Nikos Tinbergen, and Gaston Bachelard.
Their systematic approach has been used describe a range of visual and written works
created by children and adults. Prospect Center’s aim is to generate, through
observational inquiry, “knowledge of children, curriculum, of learning and teaching”
with a focus is on the particularity of the person through observation and disciplined
description (Himley, 2000, p. 8).

Prospect School, founded by Patricia Carini, her husband, Louis Carini, Marion
Stroud, and Joan Blake, later became The Prospect Archives and Center for Education
and Research, Inc. In Observation and Description: An Alternative Methodology for the
Investigation of Human Phenomena, Carini (1975), situates her approach in a historical
and philosophical context, and then illustrates its application in the Prospect School.
Determined to keep children at the center of national policy discussions, she has worked
with teachers all over the country using descriptive inquiry processes to explore the rich

**Assumptions**

How a researcher chooses to envision and frame her inquiry affects what she comes to understand about her investigations. Phenomenological research, as it applies to education, can be multifaceted and varied in approach, but the primary aim is the depiction of "the thing in itself," or "things as they are" Merleau-Ponty (1962) stresses that, "the thing is correlative to my body, and in more general terms, to my existence, of which my body is merely the stabilized structure... the whole of nature is the setting for our own life" (p. 320). The subjectivity and point of view of the observer becomes one of many, as the researcher works to grasp the essential structures and interrelations of the phenomena. Over time, the integrity of the phenomena in all its dimensions is gradually made visible through thick description. It is a process which necessitates "immersion in direct observation of a small number of cases over extended periods of time within their natural setting" (Carini, 1975, p. 5) Another setting for this research is the internal landscape of perception, a shifting, multi-leveled terrain where memory, imagination, and feeling intersect. According to Carini, "In effect the observer is here construed as one moment of the datum and as such, the fabric of his [sic] thought is inextricably woven into the datum as he [sic] is assumed to be constituent of its meaning" (p. 8).

From this point of view, culture is not conceived as an objective condition which determines directly one's thoughts and actions from without. Instead, the focus shifts to
the particularity of the person born into an historical context where, according to Michael Jackson (1996), “dialectical tension results at the intersections of self and circumstance.” He suggests that, “a person’s life does more than conserve and perpetuate these pre-existing circumstances; it interprets them, negotiates and nuances them, re-imagines them, protests against them, and endures them in such complex and subtle ways” (p. 30).

Experience is conceptualized by Jackson as situated, occurring between persons, and within relationships so that “reality is not to be sought beneath the empirical—in unconscious forms, instinctual drives, or antecedent cause—but in the dialectic of the lived interpersonal world” (p. 26).

I began my research by writing out recollections of various Institutes in order to better determine how my perspective and stance might influence my portrayals of the descriptive sessions. I wrote in order to explore incidents or experiences in connection with the Prospect Center that I found to be significant in terms of my own professional and personal development with particular attention to what it was about those events that I valued. Eventually, I decided to intersperse several of these more extended accounts and personal narratives throughout this dissertation, while keeping in mind Alan Peshkin’s (1988) suggestions that I look for “warm” and “cool” spots in my emotions or responses, to be aware of the appearance of positive as well as negative feelings, and to note those situations to which I was drawn, and those which I wished to avoid. By unwittingly assuming “the role of special pleader, defender, or lauder,” I could well move away from the “cooler edges of the world I investigated to its emotional core, where hazards of over-identification lie” (p. 149). By blending sections of personal narrative with transcriptions of conversations, sessions, and interviews I am aiming for
verisimilitude, "placing primary experience and secondary elaboration on the same footing" (Jackson, 1996, p. 42).

As my inquiry progressed, I placed observations and field texts such as transcripts, letters, e-mails and personal narratives in multiple relationships to one another in order to discern emerging clusters, patterns, and key words. Moving selections out of chronological sequence revealed how the nature of my relationships with other participants and with the larger Institute itself shaped the emerging research texts depending on how I positioned myself, as participant or as researcher, or as both. In collecting data between the years 1998 through 2000, I also drew on my experiences with the Summer Institutes since 1979. Since I was a long-time member of Prospect Center, it was important to consider how research collaborations with participants would influence our present and future relations (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, pp. 171-172).

**Relationship Terms: A Dilemma**

Teachers attending the Summer Institutes are referred to as participants throughout this thesis, but several people took a more active role in the inquiry. Knowing that language shapes the reality we describe, I considered terms for the multiple ways in which we interacted. The referent "subject," had obvious implications of hierarchy and objectivity that are definitely not consistent with my theoretical stance. The word "informant," frequently used in earlier anthropological and ethnographic writings, has associations of hierarchy, distance, and objectivity, along with the added implication of deception, and I decided not to use it. In the depictions of the daily life and routines of the Institutes, as well as personal interactions during collaborative inquiry sessions, the cultural and the particular were co-present (Jackson, 1996, p. 42).
Irving Seidman's (1998) work in interviewing was helpful in making the decision to use the term “participant,” as this term seems to best represent the more open, voluntary, and non-hierarchical role assumed by the individuals attending the Summer Institutes. The word “participant” will refer to members of the Institute in general. If someone became more deeply involved in responding to transcriptions, engaging in more frequent unstructured interviews, and co-investigating the history of Prospect’s Summer Institute, it is noted in the text.

Participant Observer

Although this study took place over three years, from 1997 through 2000, it was especially focused on the two-week 1999 Summer Institute, and on the weekend of Prospect Center’s November Conference in 2000. I lived in dormitories on the Bennington campus, attended sessions, and ate meals with the group. Traditionally, the expectation is that all participants enrolled in the Institute will attend the three-hour morning sessions, whereas participation in the afternoon and evening sessions is voluntary. I attended all the morning sessions, many afternoon sessions, and some evening ones as well. Most of my evenings were spent writing up field notes and transcribing tapes. The weekend is always free during the Institute, and both summers I remained on campus in order to schedule more focused conversations, and to continue transcribing tapes and writing up field notes.

Setting

The Institute has contracted with Bennington College to house the Summer Institute for a number of years. Participants from the two concurrent Institutes were housed in two separate dormitories and everyone had a private room. Doors were often
left ajar and occasionally people stopped by one another's rooms to visit. If doors were closed it meant that people were either working hard, napping, or not there. Post-it note pads were clipped to each door for messages, or if the light showed beneath the door, one simply knocked. Most often, people's need for uninterrupted work time was respected.

Because many who attended the Institute used it as a kind of writer's retreat, returning to their rooms after sessions, much of the socializing happened over meals. Other informal opportunities for conversations occurred during the regular walks around the rural campus before or after meals, accompanying people on food shopping trips for group lunches, or helping to run off copies of notes at the local office supply store. Rather than going to nearby art museums, concerts, or the annual regional craft fair on the weekend, as I have in the past, I elected to spend my free time working on transcriptions in the dormitory.

Small group inquiry sessions were held in the classroom buildings on campus. Traditionally the science building has been reserved for Summer Institute, but since Bennington College has been in a transitional stage for the last few years, we shared the site with a science program. An alternative meeting site has been The Barn. A renovated carriage from the previous estate held contained administrative offices, classrooms and a small lecture theater.

Every morning began with a whole group meeting of participants seated in a circle in one of the large classrooms for an overview of the of the day and to address any concerns. A table, holding a coffee urn, teapot, and cooler was located just outside the doorway and, during break times, it was a location for relaxed, informal socializing. Most of the small rooms used for sessions had large, rectangular wooden tables pushed
together in the center, surrounded by twelve to fifteen chairs. Two classrooms had projection screens which were needed for looking at children's work. As in most classrooms, there were bulletin boards, blackboards, and white erase boards. One classroom became an exhibit room for the three-day, spanning child study, during which the walls and side tables were used to display a range of work, in a variety of mediums, collected over the lifespan of one child.

Breakfast and dinner were eaten in a large, red brick, ivy-covered building with a second story balcony overlooking The Commons. The dining hall was shared with other groups housed on campus, such as Art New England or the Northeast Chamber Music Workshop, but each group tended to eat with their own members. In order to save money, lunches were made by the participants and eaten in the dormitory. Meal conversations at the Institute were lively, and often centered around the topics and issues addressed during the day, but with much humor and laughter.

The annual November Conference in Litchfield, Connecticut, is presently housed at Wisdom House, a large conference center run by Benedictine nuns, which sits on the side of a hill overlooking the Connecticut River valley. The main dormitory contains classrooms, a presentation room, and double rooms for sleeping. One section of the grounds holds a labyrinth walk made of stones, while outdoor sculptures are situated in other areas, providing pleasant spaces for walking during breaks. Many participants who are unable attend the longer Summer Institute come for the annual two-day conference, traveling to Litchfield from all over the northeast, as well as from other areas of the country.
Tape Recordings and Photographs

During the data collecting and the early writing stages for this dissertation I was interested in getting responses to the transcripts of sessions and interviews from participants. When I finished writing up a transcription of a tape, I gave copies of it to the participants involved and invited them to write comments in the margin or to highlight sections which stood out to them. Afterwards I arranged to meet with participants to address their comments. Follow-up conversations with presenters shortly after their sessions were especially helpful in filling in the background and confirming what had been said during a presentation. Since there were three concurrent small group sessions in the morning as well as multiple afternoon and evening sessions, people gave me copies of their session notes and also recommended books or articles as follow-up materials.

During this two year span, I kept in touch with participants through e-mail, letters, and the telephone. Some extended telephone interviews were tape-recorded. While I was collecting data, and, later as I was writing this dissertation, participants visited me at home. Several times I sent drafts of the research text to participants whom I regarded as co-researchers to corroborate what I had depicted. We sometimes met in person or they wrote responses to the drafts. Their interest in talking about the research project and supportive feedback was very helpful. When I wrote a paper about Summer Institute for a conference presentation in the spring 2002, I sent the draft to several participants who suggested expansions, deletions, and fact checking.

I sometimes taped conversations as I went for walks with participants or when they dropped by my room. Formal Institute sessions were taped in the classroom.
buildings where they occurred. When I audio-taped a session, I first secured permission from the person who was chairing, and then other participants. No one refused. One participant loaned me her multi-dimensional microphone, which greatly enhanced the quality of the recordings. Over the years, many sessions of the Institute have been tape-recorded for one reason or another, so participants were accustomed to seeing a microphone and tape recorder in the center of the table. In fact, if I became too involved in listening to the proceedings, people were very good about calling my attention to the fact that the tape needed to be turned over. During the last two annual November Conferences, informal conversations with participants were not recorded and instead, were later summarized in field notes. During both conferences I took extensive notes during the sessions.

Over both summers I took many still photographs; participants who took photographs made me copies of theirs as well. Though tape-recorders were familiar pieces of equipment at the Institute, video cameras were not. The focus was very intense during the morning seminars and sessions, and because sessions had never been taped before, I felt a video camera would have been disruptive and intrusive. To insure that participants were comfortable with being filmed would have taken preparation that a two week Institute did not allow. The photographs, however, were immensely helpful in recalling setting, gesture, and relationships. During the first year of this research, I posted a display of photographs that I had taken ten years earlier. As people stood in front of the bulletin board in the main hall of the dormitory they were many conversations about former and present participants, along with remarks about how the Institute had changed over the years.
Field Notes

Field notes were useful in helping me retain the duel focus as a participant and researcher. Since everyone takes notes during the sessions, I could comfortably incorporate field notes and questions into the body or the margins of my session notes. In general, I took care throughout the study not to write anything when I was in public spaces that I would be uncomfortable having someone read. When I was confused or frustrated by the daily interactions of living in a residential community, writing field notes provided a place to locate emotional reactions, so that I could move on. In the past, when I was just a participant in the Institute, if something bothered me, I would confide in close friend, or bring it up at meals where we could laugh about it. As a researcher I felt I couldn’t do this, because I didn’t want to be perceived as suddenly critical, as someone who couldn’t respect confidentiality, making people become unnecessarily guarded during conversations.

Quick notes taken during the day served as a shorthand account that could be filled out in the evening. If someone dropped by while I was organizing materials and writing up field notes, I discretely closed the lid of my laptop. In the morning I would reread what I had printed out the night before, making additions when necessary. Then I would use a highlighter to note the questions I had written in order to give me a focus for the day. I also wrote occasional notes to myself or drew symbols in the margins, such as eyes, to help me maintain what Harry Wolcott refers to as “peripheral vision.”

Each day I filed my notes away inside folders in a crate to maintain privacy as well as to help me organize my data. When I had time, I would use the computer to cut and paste comments from conversations with certain participants into separate files on
each individual, print them out, and file those in separate folders in the crate. The goal was to transcribe as much as possible during the Institute so that participants could check for accuracy while the experiences were still recent. Because some of them lived in the mid-west and southeastern parts of country, I would not see them until the following year and exchanges would have had to happen through the mail.

**Documents and Artifacts**

Throughout the study I periodically reviewed files of notes from many of the previous Summer Institutes in order to follow up on something a participant mentioned in connection with a particular year. All of the processes developed by Prospect Center share certain attributes, which made it easy to scan for specific information. For example, each session has a note-taker and the notes are traditionally kept in a specific format, listing the year, the topic of the session, the chair, and the participants. The role of the volunteer note-taker(s) is to take verbatim notes of the integrative summaries, then edit, duplicate, and distribute them to those in attendance. One copy is kept in the Prospect Center file for ongoing Institutes. Between my personal copies, and copies of notes from the concurrent sessions that I was unable attend, I have accumulated notes from all the Institutes since 1973.

Participants made copies of their journal pages for me, wrote letters, and sent e-mails, along with sharing poems, stories and articles they had written. I saved all the official letters and flyers from the two Institutes. I took photographs of what was displayed on the Institute library table, as well as the artwork from the seminar exercises on description. In order to better understand the process of scheduling the afternoon and evening sessions, I joined the scheduling committee for the first few sessions. After the
Institute ended, I remained for a few extra days while others were editing chapters for a book. During that time, I continued to code transcripts and formatted a schedule outlining each day of the 1999 Institute II as a way of visualizing the range of topics, readings, and issues addressed during the sessions. [See Appendix B]

I am currently keeping the collection of published materials written by Prospect members that I used to construct a bibliography for a co-authored book. As a member of Prospect, I also receive the biannual newsletter. Together, all of these materials helped to give me overview of the history of the Institutes and the Prospect Archives and Center for Educational Research, Inc., as the larger surrounding context for the two Summer Institutes. The Archives, along with the accompanying documentation of the various students whose work is housed there, was yet another resource for this dissertation. From my overview I could see that, from the beginning, collaborative inquiry was integral to the founding of Prospect School, the intern certification program, the staff development structure, and eventually, the Summer Institutes.

Interviews and Focused Conversations

Since I was a long-time participant, interviews were essential for helping me to bracket or set aside my assumptions about the experiences of others. With help from Patricia Carini, I decided to begin my pilot study with a focused group interview as a comfortable way to shift roles within the group. The following summer I conducted a second group interview using the same questions for those who could not come to the first one. Listening to the tapes and transcribing the first group interview, I found key words and topics that would help to give direction to my research.
Although I was interested in the particularities of each person’s account, I noticed several overarching topics, such as being a newcomer, the pleasure of studying difficult material with others, the influence on classroom practice, and the importance of having time alone to work and reflect. After listening to numerous accounts, I gained a better sense of the differences in how newcomers perceived the readings and old timers. For example, an experienced participant reading an essay by Alfred North Whitehead would most likely draw on earlier collaborative readings of his works and make additional text to text connections with selections from the whole range of readings from previous Institutes. A newcomer might be initially intimidated, but the inclusive structure facilitated room for questions that could provide additional directions for inquiry.

Working with the transcripts around the topic of close reading, I became increasingly aware of how the diversity of participants in age, professional level, and classroom experience enriched the quality of the discussions and conversations.

In general, I limited my interviews and focused conversations to participants of the Institute rather than to the director, Cecelia Traugh and the former director, Pat Carini. Their vision of collaborative inquiry is visible in the structure, planning, and processes used in the Institute and can be found elsewhere in their own publications. My questions related to how the participants perceived their experience of collaborative inquiry, what interested them during the formal sessions, and what they valued in the larger context of the Institute. I also met with former participants who had retired from teaching, because I was interested to hear what they valued about the nature of their collaborative experiences attending Summer Institute.
I audio-taped most of the focused conversations I had, but if I had an especially interesting conversation, and no tape recorder handy, I jotted brief notes to which I could refer later that evening. During the Institute it is common for people to carry a notebook or a pad for jotting something down during a conversation, so I was not at all conspicuous in doing the same. I did not transcribe these tapes in their entirety, but listened to them more than once to select excerpts for later transcription. Sessions that were not taped were summarized.

Moving from Data Gathering to Representation

As I finished gathering the data, I had to determine an entry-point which interested me as a way of beginning the research text. I found myself increasingly drawn to the intersections between the recollections of participants and the ideas and topics from various past Institutes. Using documents from previous Institutes, annotated topic summaries by Patricia Carini and Cecelia Traugh, accounts from participants, along with my personal journals, I assembled a time line of the Institutes over the last twenty-five years. As a working document, the time line provided a concise a list of themes, seminar topics, reading lists, key words, and small group work for most of the Institutes. Reviewing the sequence of the Institutes helped me to see how new inquiry strands evolved. [See Appendix B.]

In the summer of 1999, I chaired four extended small sessions using descriptive processes to look more closely at the history of two past Institutes that were spaced ten years apart. After reading through the materials, we generated a list of keywords under which we clustered various recurrent phrases from the two Institutes. Because Summer
Institutes are ongoing and their topics arise out of the work of earlier summers, the concepts in the headings continue to orient the ongoing studies of the group.

As a way of ending our work together, I also asked people to give a longer oral personal account of an Institute of their choice. Our personal recollections, along with the our descriptions of selected documents provided me with some starting places for thinking about the intersection of personal history and the history of the Institute. I appreciated their interest in our collaborative endeavor, as well as the range of knowledge and experience each co-researcher brought to our work over the three days. Quite often one person’s recollection or insight would trigger someone else’s memory, filling out the account in ways that I could not have managed alone. Afterwards I gave them the transcripts of our time together for additional editing. After the Institute, I followed up on the comments and anecdotes that pertained to my emerging key concepts, such as the importance of choice and preference as they related to both formal and informal collaboration during the Institute.

The following spring, I presented my exploration of the emerging epistemological questions around knowledge and authority to a graduate colloquium. Preparing for that presentation led me back to “the thing in itself” or the particular phenomena of collaborative inquiry and the ways in which it could be portrayed. Following the colloquium I wrote up several descriptive vignettes of small group inquiries.

Several of the more experienced and interested participants had their own impressions of what I was about, or what they thought I should be about. One person took me aside saying she hoped that I would not portray the group as “New Agers,” the descriptive processes as “mystical,” and “Patricia Carini as a guru.” I was surprised by
this, but she was more aware than I of how the Institutes and Prospect Center are sometimes perceived by other educators. I once heard someone mention a particular press that refused to accept manuscripts from anyone connected to the Prospect Center, referring to them as “disciples.” My task at that time, however, was not to get distracted by well-meaning cautionary advice or suggestions.

Reactions to the transcripts varied, but several people commented on the range and quality of the discussions. One wrote:

Where else in the world would a group of schoolteachers--mostly elementary teachers at that--engage in this kind of thought and talk, over two weeks, over twenty-odd years for many of us. Are we a select breed who get excited by ideas? For me, the “excitement” began with the kind of talk we did about kids in the beginning, but it’s gone way beyond that by now.

Several other participants shared similar reactions after they read the transcripts of sessions. Sometimes notes were written in the margin, such as “Did I really say this!”

As a voluntary study group comprised of individuals who are already overextended with commitments and responsibilities, there is little reason to keep verbatim transcripts of sessions. While Institutes are primarily oral, detailed notes of the chair’s summaries are distributed to the participants who attend each session. Only the director and the voluntary planning committee use the entire collection of notes from an Institute to help decide whether or not to move a topic forward into the next summer, or if a new strand of inquiry should be taken up.

In order to continue working with the data when I wasn’t transcribing, I began arranging field texts, such as transcripts, field notes, and session notes from the crates, into three-ring binders. I sorted items by summers, and then used Post-it tape flags to signal transcript sections for selected quotations. Another binder was divided into
sections, each containing transcripts from participants with whom I had more frequent exchanges. As I read through the transcripts, I highlighted key words in a color coded system, which helped me to notice which key words occurred most frequently and in which settings. Field notes from the first summer compared with those of the second summer revealed increasing comfort on my part in assuming the role of researcher within the group.

From the Field Text to Research Text

In *Interpretive Ethnography*, Norman Denzin (1997) writes about a “feminist, communitarian ethical model of research that stresses human dignity, care, justice, and interpersonal respect.” He goes on to list the values of this ethical system as: importance of community, mutuality, moral identity, and subject as co-participant (pp. 274-275). Although at first it seemed reductionist to categorize words like “mutuality” or “collaboration,” I eventually realized that I could portray the lived experience of “mutuality” in a way that might counter stereotypical assumptions about people who hold these values, and instead, offer portraits which may enlarge perceptions or, at least raise interesting questions.

For example, one of the participants, Brian, spoke about how he had been, “gentled here some too.” After reading through the transcription, his remarks stood out to me, and I realized the importance of following up on his statement for clarification. During our next meeting we read through his earlier comment and he added: “Being careful with one another and not wanting to step on their toes. It’s not like handling someone with kid gloves--it has to do with the whole idea of observation and not jumping too quickly to answer on something.” Later he noted the importance of learning to listen,
"in a fashion which really is intentional about developing understanding of the other person's point of view." Contrasting how he listened before attending Prospect events and now, he noted that he had a tendency to "see things in thesis/antithesis instead of what's been described as a weaving together of thoughts here... and that's had implications all through my life, through my work life and in my home life."

Chairing, formal processes inhibit the domination of a discussion by one person, and because descriptive inquiry takes time, all participants have more time to think before they make a comment. According to Brian, this kind of interaction differs from ordinary consideration nor is it necessarily a feminist stance. It is more likely that Pat Carini's interest developing applications of the work of Edmund Husserl, M. Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger, Gaston Bachelard, Alfred North Whitehead and Owen Barfield that led to the deliberately slow and systematic approach that characterizes the discourse of the formal descriptive processes.

Frequently used terms acquired associations and meanings particular to the Institute. One of my key concepts, collaboration, appeared in the brochures in the form of "collaborative inquiry" but was infrequently used by the Institute participants to describe their work with one another. Instead, their responses referred to "sharing ideas," "working together using the Processes," "thinking together," "links to," "alongside," and "new perspective." Each of these terms designated certain ways of thinking together and were used by participants like verbal shorthand. Over the years new words would come to predominate the conversations and sessions. Since most participants were self-conscious about their tendency to use jargon, words such as "public space" would eventually surface in humorous references and parodies. Some current words are
“alongside” and “entry-point,” terms that have been quite helpful in thinking about how ideas from a variety of sources are related to one another and, in addition, how participants come to understand those ideas.

According to Norman Denzin (1998) “One learns about method by thinking about how one makes sense of one’s own life” (p. 315). Beginning with the selection of Wheelock College for graduate school, I was committed to teaching as a political activity with moral implications and believed that all teachers have the potential to be transformative intellectuals. I reflected on my own history of involvement with a variety of educator’s network groups, such as the Children’s Thinking Seminars in Cambridge, the North Dakota Study Group, Boston Laboratory for Teachers (BLT), Harvard Teacher’s Center, and Educators for Social Responsibility in order to think about what initially engaged me and sustained my participation. Rereading journal entries from summers at Prospect I became more aware of the kinds of topics and activities that held my interest over the years. Those readings led to further writing, specifically around collaborative inquiry, in order to think about how my interests and preferences, along with what I valued, could influence the interpretive phases of this research. Clarity about my own inclinations and beliefs has helped me to notice where my focus naturally gravitated as I described the experiences of others.

I did not want to write an idealized portrayal of the Summer Institutes because, in my experience, there are always difficult issues that arise in network groups interested in the transformation of schools, particularly if they are residential and ongoing (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996). For example I thought about whether or not include how participants negotiate the tensions around content selection and scheduling for afternoon and evening
small group sessions. There were also the day-to-day concerns around styles of facilitating, personal versus Institute purposes, and issues of governance and leadership.

When I had questions about what to include, conversations with retired participants who no longer attended the Institute helped to keep me focused on the purpose of my study. They noted that a balanced research text would acknowledge some of the inevitable difficulties and tensions of the Institute, but keep as the primary focus, the epistemological questions that arise out of collaborative descriptive inquiry processes. Throughout the process of writing this dissertation I asked participants if they would be willing to read sections of the research text as a check on my perceptions and interpretations. They were in agreement, which to me was an indication that the work would have some validity. For example, "I think you've succeeded in positioning yourself in the inquiry but not dominating it with your personal presence." Their suggestions for correction, expansion, or clarification were often incorporated into later drafts.

Throughout this research I have struggled with the tensions of speaking for or about others in the Prospect Center community. Since this group is already well represented in co-authored as well as individual publications, it is unlikely that I would be perceived as speaking for the group. However, rather than extract short sentences from extended sessions or conversations, I chose to include longer narrative selections in order to maintain a multiplicity of voices. In deference to the reader several participants appear more frequently and their participation can be traced throughout the dissertation. In selecting those participants I considered representation of professional levels, geographical location, length of association with the Institute, and variety of personal
interests. The result is a layering in of my perceptions and voice with the embodied voices of others. My goal throughout this research was to maintain an “attitude of care” and write in a way that recognized and valued the many contributions of the participants in this study (Himley, 2000, p. 56).

I begin with an introduction to the range of Prospect Center’s descriptive review processes as experienced by newcomers, then move to introduce readers to other processes common to the Morning Seminar such as close reading, and an inquiry of what it means to describe something. These examples are followed by afternoon and evening sessions that address the individual needs of participants, for example sharing a paper and reflecting on a word. Another setting, the annual November Conference depicts how attending the Institute relates to the daily work in classrooms with a particular focus on the Descriptive Review of one child around the issue of reading. The last chapter contains a series of recollections from a small group of participants who comment on Institutes they found to be particularly memorable. By situating these recollections in the larger context of the Summer Institutes, I assist the reader in recognizing and understanding some of the meaning structures or themes that are particular to each account. In the end, one should have a better sense of what it is about the experience of Summer Institute that draws and sustains voluntary participation over an unusually long span of time.
CHAPTER TWO

NEWCOMERS: TEACHING INSTITUTE I

The basic content of the Institute is the Prospect Descriptive Processes and the unique perspective they provide for thinking about children and their work. Some of the issues central to this Institute are: What does it mean to take the time to look closely and describe? What does a school or classroom have to be in order that each child be recognized and heard? What of importance to children and their education is made visible through their works? What must we do to enable each child to be the agent of his/her own learning?

Introductory Letter to Participants
Summer Institute I, 1997

This chapter is an account of how the faculty of The Summer Institute on Descriptive Inquiry of 1997 worked together to co-teach the Institute on Descriptive Process. Newcomers attend the introductory Institute in order to learn about and practice Prospect Center's descriptive review processes. Working in small groups for the first two and a half days, they become familiar with the collected works of a former student of Prospect School. Using materials from the child's Prospect Archive files, they engage in descriptive reviews of selected visual and written works from kindergarten through eighth grade. Teachers' running records and anecdotal reports to parents are examined as well. Afterwards participants apply what they have learned as they practice descriptive reviews using material from their own classrooms.

In order to avoid confusion, for the remainder of this dissertation, The Summer Institute on Descriptive Processes for newcomers will be referred to as Institute I and The Summer Institute on Descriptive Inquiry, for individuals already familiar with Prospect
Center's descriptive processes, as Institute II. Institute I runs for only five days concurrently with Institute II, which runs for two weeks.

Planning for the Institute

Before the Institute began, Lisa, as the coordinator, arranged for the three of us who were co-faculty that summer to have two conference calls. Since Brian was teaching the Institute for the first time, he was especially interested in knowing what was expected of him. Since a three-day Child Study traditionally begins the Institute, each of us had already selected a child from the Prospect Archive collection and asked that the child's file be shipped to us from North Bennington. It takes some time to become familiar with Prospect's extensive materials. The file for each child contains up to nine years of visual work, writing, number work, among others, along with each year's weekly teacher records and anecdotal parent reports.

In the previous summers that I had been an instructor for the Institute I had selected a different child each time in order to learn more about the Archives collection, but in 1997 I chose to work with Sean, a pseudonym, because I was already familiar with his file. Consequently, I was able to focus more on the notion of collaborative inquiry as it is practiced at Summer Institutes as I reviewed essays, session notes from the previous summers of teaching, and other documents that I had collected over the years.

Because of the preparation involved, and the fact that teaching skills improve with practice, it is best if one can teach the Institute more than once. For example, after the second summer of teaching, I had a much better sense of how the descriptive inquiry skills of newcomers developed over the first few days of the Institute. As the third summer began, I could anticipate frequently asked questions, along with what they might
find especially difficult. However, every summer I struggled with keeping the balance
between intervention, explanation, and allowing participants to discuss their own
questions.

The three of us agreed to arrive at the Bennington College campus on Saturday, a
day early, to continue our planning in person. Once the Institute began on Sunday
afternoon, we anticipated that our busy day-time schedules would only allow for quick
conversations during breaks and meals. Determined to set aside some time each day for
co-planning, and reviewing the day, we decided to meet briefly in the evenings. The
participants would soon come knocking on our doors for assistance, and was important to
able available to them as well. We drafted a tentative schedule for the Institute, relying
on what had worked well over the previous summers. Then, after reading over the
enrollment sheets, we assigned the participants to three small groups for the first two and
a half days where they would engage in an in-depth, spanning Child Study.

Dividing the group is sometimes a difficult task. Many of the participants who
enroll in Institute I usually come in school or network cohort groups, receiving full or
partial tuition support in order to attend. They often arrive expecting to stay together for
the duration of the Institute. However, people who know one another are usually
dispersed into separate groups for the beginning half of the Institute, in Prospect's words,
to "jar them out their habitual perceptions." After the Child Study ends they are free to
choose the sessions they would like to attend.

The range of professional levels in the participants makes being an instructor for
the Institute especially challenging, but if the groups are balanced with a good
representation of levels, then collaborative inquiry is enhanced. Generally most of the
participants work in elementary schools, although each year, more teachers attend who teach in middle schools and high schools. In addition, there is at least one college professor and one or two school administrators to make a total of approximately twenty-five participants altogether.

Both Summer Institutes traditionally run concurrently, Institute I for five days, and Institute II for two weeks. Attending Institute I is considered a prerequisite for joining Institute II, where it is assumed that the participants are familiar with and are experienced in using the Prospect Center's descriptive inquiry processes. Scheduling both Institutes at the same time period creates opportunities for both social and intellectual interactions. Faculty for Institute I is drawn from the experienced participants of Institute II who volunteer their time in return for receiving a stipend for the remaining week of Institute II, should they choose to stay on. This particular summer, Lisa and I planned to stay on and to join Institute II the following weekend, while Brian had elected to return home.

Not all participants wish to teach Institute I. For example, individuals who are committed to their own research projects have only a short time in the summer to write, and they are understandably reluctant to teach. Others are hesitant to become an instructor because they feel that they lack the necessary experience or skills to teach other adults. However, participants can contribute in other ways, such as volunteering to chair an afternoon session in Institute I for a newcomer's presentation or presenting a Descriptive Review of a Child and answering follow-up questions. Evening sessions of Institute II are also open to attendees of Institute I. As a welcoming gesture on the
opening evening, Institute II participants traditionally organize and host a wine and cheese reception before dinner for both Institutes.

Building Community

Over time an informal handbook has been created for instructors of Institute I that helps to orient new faculty, such as Brian. Since this is a voluntary organization, some pages are handwritten, but it contains a recommended time line, application forms, sample letters to participants, samples of the week's schedule, evaluation forms, and a list of helpful suggestions, such as having a cooler filled with drinks and light snacks available to participants as they arrive.

We made certain that the cooler was well stocked and assembled the registration materials in the living room of our dormitory as we prepared to greet our new arrivals and help them to register. Many of them had driven seven hours from urban centers such as New York City and Philadelphia. First-time visitors to rural Vermont were both tired and excited to be there, but since their first two-hour session would begin shortly, we encouraged them to unpack and get settled soon.

Sessions for both Institutes were held in the Bennington College science building, with the first one beginning at 2:00. Rounding up our new participants just as they settled into their dormitory rooms, we left a note on the door for late comers, and walked to Kendall Hall on the upper level of the campus. Our first session began with brief introductions for the whole group, followed by the process, A Reflection on a Keyword.

As the more experienced chairperson among the three of us, Lisa had selected the word "learn" for the Reflection. She told them they would have a few minutes to write down words and phrases that came to mind evoked by the word "learn," and "to think
about the contexts in which it is used, and ways it may or may not relate to your own experiences." For many participants this was their first experience using one of Prospect Center’s reflective process. Their handout, “Working Documents From the Prospect Center,” provided an explanation for each process that they would encounter during the Institute. For using a Reflection on a Keyword:

Through this integration, participants’ personal histories, experiences and thoughts are joined with those of others to produce a strong common experience, history, and thought connected with the word chosen for their mutual consideration. Thus, the process illustrates with equal emphasis the uniqueness of perspective each person brings to an idea, and the power of collective thought generated by this diversity.

Before we began the Reflection, Lisa invited them to join her in jotting down clusters of phrases and ideas that could be grouped under headings as they listened to people’s accounts. Participants wrote quietly for about ten minutes until Lisa asked, "Who would like to begin?" Afterwards, individuals spoke in turn around the circle while Lisa quickly wrote down what they said in her notebook, making a diagram juxtaposing the connections and complementarities that emerged among the responses. After her integrative summary, she explained that she had grouped their statements under the headings of: setting, purpose, evaluation, imagination, self-initiated learning, and learning through schooling. Finally Lisa asked if there was anything that she had left out, or if there were other headings that people had found helpful. A brief discussion followed and then we walked from the science building back down the hill to for the wine and cheese gathering before dinner hosted by Institute II. Meals were served in the campus dining hall, so breakfast and dinner continued to provide an ongoing opportunity for colleagues who were attending different Institutes to reconnect.
As an evening activity, we asked the participants to look over the handbook of descriptive processes and to prepare a brief recollection of a learning experience to present in their small groups the next day. We also asked them to be thinking about the word “describe” for the next day’s Keyword Reflection. Having met our participants, Lisa, Brian, and I met later that evening to make sure that we had balanced groups. Our main concern was to disperse an unusually large cohort group evenly among the three of us.

Small Group Work

The Institute traditionally begins the morning meeting in a whole group for announcements and questions and then adjourns to sessions that last until lunch. Each of the three small groups would remain intact for first two and a half days of the Institute in an in-depth Child Study. Our group met in the science lab, characterized by its large overhead exhaust fan that could not be turned off. On very hot days, however, we had one of the coolest spots in the building.

I would serve as the chairperson of our sessions as well as being a contributor. We began with their accounts of learning experiences. We heard about learning to roller blade along the shore of Lake Michigan and what it was like to visit a grandfather who lived on an island in Greece as he read aloud from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Speakers talked about something they learned on their own as well as from someone they admired. Despite the fact that they taught together, through this process our cohort group discovered things about one another’s interests that they had not known before. A remark that we had all chosen to talk about learning experiences that occurred outside of school, led into a discussion of what sorts of things we thought about when we were
deciding what to present. It appeared that no one had considered talking about especially memorable learning from school assignments, because there were so few that they could recall.

Their assignment, to think about what engaged them as learners, was intended to provide a starting place for noticing what interested Sean, our study child. We began with a slide show that was an overview of his visual work, along with samples of his writing. I had spent several hours on Saturday, working over a light table, in order to select 180 archival slides. I also selected several slides in particular that could be used for our in-depth description. Sean's Archive Reference Edition contains examples from a total of 1,154 pieces representing his work from kindergarten through eighth grade.

We turned out the lights in our classroom and spent the next forty minutes looking at and discussing the array from Sean’s collected works. As they watched, I asked them to jot down the numbers or descriptions of slides that particularly interested them. Afterwards, their task was to choose one slide that they might like to describe as a group. They requested that we temporarily set aside several samples in order to review each of them, and then choose.

I was not surprised that many in the group were drawn to the same selections that I had chosen in advance. Just as in any collection of work by an adult artist or writer, there are certain pieces from a child’s spanning collection of works that stand out for any number of reasons, such as vividness of imagery, voice, composition, and design. Eventually the group settled on three slides: two drawings of faces, and an atmospheric drawing of a jack-o’-lantern against a black sky done in magic marker.
The confident and vocal school cohort group, with humor and persuasiveness, managed to negotiate compromises around assignments for the remainder of our time together. Knowing that it would take at least an hour to adequately introduce a new process and practice it, I knew that we would not be able to describe all three slides in depth. It was time for a lunch break, so we headed off to the dining hall. Eating our meals together enabled me to get to know them better, while it gave them an opportunity to ask questions about our sessions.

Describing Sean's Artwork

We began our afternoon session with a half hour Reflection on the Keyword, “describe.” As they spoke I clustered their comments under headings, such as the use of senses, or the ways in which we communicate to others what we notice. From their comments I found that they were aware of how personal knowledge, assumptions, and bias influence perception. That led to a discussion about where we position ourselves during a description, both physically and intellectually, because it affects whether we see something in its entirety or only a fraction of the whole. What we say may be conjecture, until we are more aware of the whole.

Keeping these ideas about description in mind, we returned to the task of selecting a slide. They all agreed to begin with a portrait that Sean drew when he was four. It stood out to them because of the expressive nature of its unusually pointed teeth and asymmetrical eyes. But before beginning our description, we did a very brief Reflection on the word, “eye.” After watching all the slides they had noticed that eyes were a recurrent motif in a number of Sean’s drawings and paintings.
Our investigation of Sean's work began with the foundational process, A Descriptive Review of a Child's Work. Looking together at the handbook of descriptive practices, we read through the section on Reviews of children's work. It was important for newcomers to understand some of the rationale for the unexpected formality of looking at a drawing done by a child. According to the most recent edition of the manual for using the descriptive processes, a basic premise is that:

The close tie of maker to works made, requires that when describing a work, the drawing or writing or painting be treated with the same seriousness and respect as would be accorded to the person who made it (p. 20, 2002).

I cautioned the group that I might ask questions for clarification during the rounds of description if I felt that people seemed to be making assumptions, speculating or heading towards psychological or typological interpretations. It is not unusual in schools and clinics for children's artwork to be used to diagnose or interpret behavior. Ideally, either Sean or his family could be in the room and not be made uncomfortable anything that was said. I had not told them anything about Sean, because during a Review, the focus is primarily on the work. Since Sean is a pseudonym, all work was masked to cover his real name. We would learn about him through his works and then through his school records. An underlying assumption in the use of Prospect Center's descriptive processes is that, "works—all works—bear the imprint of the child and that the print left there is neither accidental nor merely happenstancial" (Ibid.).

In an in-depth child study, a full description of one drawing or painting is often used to provide an entry point into the child's larger collection of work. With our chairs grouped into a semi-circle around the projection screen, participants could easily see one another as well as the slide of the drawing. Our process started with first impressions of
Sean's drawing. Verbalizing their immediate responses or intuitive sense of the work, makes it possible for them to hear the range of commonalities and differences within the group's responses. As the chair, I took notes of their comments, and briefly summarized their impressions. In the meantime, I encouraged them write down questions or comments as they came to mind so that people could speak without interruption during the rounds of description. Notes are helpful for the chairperson, because the summaries are delivered extemporaneously, and since assignments build on the work from the previous day, they also provide a record of the group's thinking. During the Institutes it is common for the chairperson to ask for volunteers to take notes of the summaries.

Next, we began with the careful, systematic description of Sean's drawing. A "round" of descriptions varies, depending on the size of group. It may mean twice around the circle, or three times, if there are fewer than six people. During this round I asked them to comment on the literal surface aspects of the drawing, such as color, shapes, patterns, and subject by specifically naming what and where something was located in the work. For example, someone said that one color marker was used to make the circular shape of the head and its features. After a brief summary, we moved on to look at other elements of the drawing, such as style, tone, rhythm, and form. At this part of the process, people are asked to notice repetitions, recurrent images and the larger composition of the piece. For example, the group noted the contrast between the sharp triangular teeth on the top row of the mouth and the more rounded teeth on the bottom. Often, the longer a group looks at a work together, the more they notice, discovering subtle aspects that were overlooked earlier.
Through repeated rounds, they began to notice that collaborative description enabled them to perceive and describe elements they would have missed if they had been working alone. For example, after one person said, "There is a diagonal line with shorter, evenly spaced lines on top of it," she heard from her neighbor's comment that she was more absorbed in looking at and thinking about the teeth. Preoccupation with one section of a work makes it easy to overlook the rest. Once the description was completed and the various disparate parts of the drawing were agreed upon, they were ready to look for any recurring patterns or images that would connect one part of the work to another.

The final round of a descriptive review generally addresses the child's presence in the work. I posed the following questions from the handbook: What knowledge or planning is evident in how the work was composed? What is the evidence of choices made? What is the evidence of the child's hand or voice? For example, what is the quality the child's gesture captured in a line? What evidence is there of the child's standards? Comments made during the initial round of first impressions were modified, affirmed, or rejected based on the groundwork of our careful description. A sense of Sean as a young child was beginning to emerge through the expressive gestures of his portrait. After an hour and a half of close work, it was time for a final summary where "Statements and ideas are taken out of a chronological frame, distilled, integrated, and given back in order to and help people to reorganize their thoughts."

What makes this process particularly difficult for newcomers, as well as experienced participants, is the act of translating visual arts into the medium of speech. We orally reconstructed the drawing building layer upon layer until we were able to perceive it as a whole. As members in our group struggled with finding an appropriate
word to describe an aspect of the drawing, I encouraged them to persist until they had clarified what they wanted to say. Taking the time to find the precise word to describe an aspect of the work enhanced the ability of everyone in the group to see the piece from another’s perspective. Sometimes finding just the right word can open ways of perceiving something in a new way. For example, in the more interpretive part of our process, when someone said the teeth give the face an “almost cat-like image,” we agreed. The slide of Sean’s bold colored drawing of a cat against a red background looking directly at the viewer came occurred to several of us.

Over the course of the Descriptive Review, the group eventually learned to slow down and to ground their comments in the work itself, rather than move towards a premature conclusion. Understanding the work as a whole, however, is not the same as arriving at a definitive interpretation. According to Prospect Center, “when art works are ‘finished’ or completed they (like memories) continue to yield new and different shades of meaning—even to the person that made them in the first place” (Working Documents, 1986, p. 11).

Before we stopped for the day, even though they were tired, the group insisted on looking once more at the drawing of a jack-o-lantern that Sean made when he was eight. In contrast to the earlier drawing of a face, this piece executed in bold colors, surrounded by light. The illuminated letters, J-O-L were an important part of the composition. The group noted what they referred to as his “whimsical side,” a quality that surfaced in many of his pieces. They also expressed a growing appreciation of Sean's ability to express emotion, humor and relationships through his visual works. According to Prospect's Descriptive Processes: The Child, The Art of Teacher, & The Classroom & School

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(Prospect, 2000), teachers learn a great deal when they set aside the time to carefully describe children's work:

Describing works is a reminder that children— all children— are makers and that the making of works serves the growing mind, imagination, and understanding in ways that instruction cannot. In the making of works, the child makes the world. In the making of works, the child discovers and lends to inner meanings and understandings an outward representation. Describing works enlarges the describer's appreciation for the work and deepens recognition of the maker (pp. 20-21).

At the end of our session I handed out their next assignment, collated booklets containing transcriptions of Sean’s nine years of writing. I asked them to read through it that evening and to select passages that caught their attention or stood out to them in some way.

Describing Sean’s Written Work

On Tuesday we were ready to select pieces of writing for collaborative description from Sean’s primary, intermediate, and middle school years. I summarized the work we had done the day before, and reminded them again that the intention was to describe a selection of written work. I acknowledged that, while they may be accustomed to looking at children's writing in terms of standards or categorizing it according to a developmental stage, they needed to temporarily set aside that way of working when practicing descriptive processes. Just as we had done the previous day, we would look first at the surface content of a piece, its recurrent elements, and then, how they were woven together. Following that, we would consider where Sean, as the author, stood in relation to his work. Finally, recalling the visual work the day before, we would describe what Sean notices, where his interests lie, and what he values. They would be expected to provide evidence from his work for their statements.
We began by reading aloud selections from Sean's writing and talking about why certain pieces stood out to us. Transformation and adventure were prominent in his work and he frequently appeared in his own stories. Realizing that they would only have time to describe one story, the group began to quickly skim the selections we agreed interested us most. The majority wanted to work with a relatively long story. However I reminded them how much time an in-depth description would take for a story of that length and instead, suggested a different story.

With good humor, they made the case to describe “A Fairy Tale,” written when Sean was ten. I relented, partially because so many in the group were intermediate level teachers. The story began, “Once upon a time there was a little boy who was lost in the woods and frightened.” After I found the slides of the original, one of the group members read the story aloud. During most of the Review we worked from the original work. Projecting it on the large screen in the front of the room made it possible to study Sean's handwriting, spacing, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and illustrations. The story was also typed up in the booklets of his writing samples.

After a brief Reflection on the word, “wish,” we moved on to describe the story, itself. Like many of Sean’s stories, this one was about a journey, filled with magic, small dangers, and transformation. In it, a young boy named, Sean, goes into the woods at 7:30 PM where he meets a little creature that grants him several wishes. He does a few forbidden things, such as eating wild mushrooms, and then returns home to face the consequences of having been out too late. The story contains surprisingly sophisticated elements, such as internal dialogue and direct address to the reader. One member made the comment that Sean seemed to be very aware of his audience, deliberately using
devices that appealed to the readers in order to keep their interest. Another member of the group found that Sean had used the word, “wish,” thirteen times in his story. Even speeding up towards the end, our description lasted almost two hours. Afterwards, they expressed surprise, because they initially considered the story to be fairly simple.

The people in this group clearly had more experience looking at children’s writing than they did artwork. On this day of our study, my role as the chair shifted from one of encouragement to one of alerting them when I noticed that they were describing Sean’s writing in ways that were either evaluative or critical. For example there were comments about the large number of approximate spellings for a child his age. After the mid-morning break, as they became more experienced with the process, they began to take responsibility for recognizing when they were making more evaluative than descriptive comments. Just as with Sean’s artwork, they could eventually locate and describe specific elements in his writing selections as evidence for what he knew and could apply in his writing. They also noticed that the same sly humor that was apparent in his visual work was also evident in several of his writing selections. After the final summary, one person remarked how helpful it was to see one child's writing spanning kindergarten through eighth grade and that, sadly, it was an opportunity that most teachers never have.

It had become evident, while looking at his writing, that Sean was not a fluent reader until he was eight and that raised questions for the group. We talked about developmental landmarks and standards and the implications of taking the long view on children’s writing in the current school climate of testing for reading proficiency by third grade. Because of the intensive nature of the Institute with its focus on learning review processes, there was not enough time to address these questions in-depth. Over lunches,
however, the conversations often continued. Since one of the aims of the Institute was to link description with inquiry, instructors noted questions as they came up so that the whole group could discuss some of them when Patricia Carini made her presentation the following afternoon.

Before we went to lunch, we took the slides of visual and written work that we had described and reinserted them back into the two slide carrels that held the larger collection from Sean's Archives file. They were not as quiet this time. Instead, members of the group began calling out to one another to notice familiar themes or motifs, such as eye, hand, fire, and transformation. They were struck again by his facility in the use of line and his unusual sense of composition. They were amused by Sean's inventive humor and at the mischievousness displayed in both his visual and written work. For all of us, seeing the complete array of slides once again was an exciting and satisfying experience.

Now that our group was familiar with Sean's written and visual work, I asked them to imagine, if they were his teacher, how they might provision a classroom. In what ways might they address his needs, strengths, interests, and preferences for materials. What books and curriculum themes did they think might be appealing to Sean? Could they support their choices with evidence from his work? After the first members tentatively offered suggestions, others soon followed, until everyone had at least one chance to participate. Listening to their discussion, I was able to assess their increasing knowledge of Sean as a learner. The range of professional teaching levels in the group almost matched the nine-year span of his work, making it possible for each of them to imagine Sean in their classrooms.
Looking at Sean’s School Records

As the teachers in our group learned more about Sean’s interests and strengths, they naturally became more curious about the person behind the work. Personal information and family background are deliberately excluded from the Archive files in the interest of protecting the child. However they do contain copies of weekly teacher records and anecdotal parent reports. Each Friday children at Prospect School were released early in order to give teachers time to write a weekly summary paragraph about each student in the class. Although the Archive files contain a normally diverse range of children, teachers sometimes find this difficult to realize because the familiar words and labels that categorize children as being hyperactive, having special needs or being gifted, such as ADD, SPED or GAT are absent. Because of this, participants sometimes inferred that the students at the school were a select group of children. Teachers at Prospect School tried to minimize using evaluative language, jargon, or educational labels in written records, aiming instead for vivid descriptions of each child. I also encouraged our group to find precise, but ordinary, words that would aptly describe how they saw Sean. While they understood the rationale behind the objection to using shorthand labels, they found it difficult to practice in their descriptions of work. A five-day Institute isn't really long enough to provide the kind of regular application needed over time to shift the way in which teachers were accustomed to working.

Their next assignment was to read through collated samples of the teacher records and the parent reports from Sean’s nine years at Prospect School. A half-day was allotted for this part of the Child Study. Because of the amount of material contained in the records, it is common for groups to request that we divide them into sections and portion
them out to individuals. In order to develop their own understanding of the developing child behind the works they have come to know, instructors of the Institute strongly advise that participants skim through the entire document. We asked participants to keep the following questions in mind as they read: How does the teacher form knowledge of a child? What values and standards are implicit in the records—the teacher’s as well as the child’s? How are they expressed?

In each of the three child study groups, through their familiarity with the Archive files, participants had developed a sense of the person behind the work. As people gathered in cross-group clusters, their eagerness to learn more about their child in a classroom setting was expressed in spontaneous readings. Excerpts from the school record collections could be over-heard in the hallways and in the living room of the dormitory. Reading through each teacher’s documentation of the child’s year they discovered recognizable characteristics, themes, and interests, but they also found unexpected personal characteristics as well. Since the faculty shared living space with the participants of the Institute and ate our meals with them we were already aware that they spoke with one another about their study children. But to see them excited to learn more the children was an affirmation of our small group collaborative inquiries.

The approach used to describe Sean’s collection of written work on the previous day was now applied to his school records collection. On Wednesday morning members of our group took turns reading aloud their selections from the booklet of records. Once again, as with both the visual and written works, they found that there were particular sections in the records that had been selected by almost everyone, either because they were unexpected, humorous, especially insightful, or puzzling. During our previous
descriptions, people often asked which selections of Sean’s work were self-initiated and which were not. Reading the records made it possible for them to determine which projects were a responses to curriculum related prompts.

Extensive parental reports created a rather surprising picture of Sean the person, as being volatile and "quick." Becoming familiar with the records helped them to better understand how each of Sean’s teachers planned and shaped their instruction to meet his needs. They discovered that in the earlier grades he had a regular reading tutor who established a relationship with him by drawing. Attending a Descriptive Review of a Child on the previous afternoon, they heard a teacher’s detailed portrayal of a child. She had developed a focusing question for her presentation, and asked them to help her by generating possible recommendations relating to her question that she might try in her room. Interest grew in how Prospect School used collaborative descriptive process to review teacher practice as well as to support the children’s developing knowledge.

One person in our group took the time to trace the particular curriculum strands developed by one of Sean's teachers who taught the same age group she did. Many participants assumed that instruction was individualized, but in reading the records, they discovered that the teachers planned a variety of deliberately inclusive activities from which children were asked to choose. It was clear from the records which whole group studies held Sean's interest and which did not, and when he was not interested, how he responded. I initiated a discussion of what they determined to be Sean's strong preferences and values that held throughout his time at the school, and related that, in turn, to their own opening recollections of a learning experience.
This discussion marked the end of our time together as a small group. Later that afternoon, Patricia Carini visited the Institute. After showing slides from the Prospect School, she gave a talk about her time there. Later she answered questions about the development and application of various descriptive processes and then responded to queries about the individual study children. Each year, participants come to feel great attachment to the children that they have come to know so well through their works and records. As a result they are quite interested to know what those children might be like as young men and women. According to Pat, most of the school's former students were now young adults and had moved away from North Bennington. She had lost touch with many of them. A few continued to occasionally visit the Archive to look at their collections of work, one of whom was an Archive study child that summer.

**Summary of the Child Study Group Sessions**

As newcomers to the use of descriptive processes, the participants in our group found that they had to keep many things in mind: describing rather than evaluating; learning to look carefully while listening to the contributions of others and thinking what they might add; becoming familiar with one child’s body of work and school records over an eight year span in only two and a half days. For those teachers who were more accustomed to a collaborative protocol predicated on a more evaluative stance, such as the one used by the Coalition of Essential Schools, it took self-restraint, as well as practice, to make only descriptive comments.

In contrast, the phenomenological approach of the Institute uses documentation and description as a way to see, a way of knowing. As participants temporarily set aside their assumptions and preconceptions in order to look closely for an extended period,
questions arise. As they work together building a portrayal of an object, a person, or a
selection of work, the intent is to open up further inquiry rather than to analyze, explain
or categorize. Through their collaborative looking as they sit alongside one another, new
knowledge is created out of the multiplicity of their perspectives. Larger questions can
then be addressed such as, "What do classrooms and schools have to be to foster each
child as a maker of things, ideas, and meaning?" (Traugh, 1996, pp. 4-6).

Instructors had to work hard to foster a spirit of inclusive collaboration in each
group. Because such an unusually large cohort group had been deliberately split up into
three groups, one approach was to begin the Institute with a whole group Reflection,
followed by small group personal recollections that regularly incorporated people's
names and comments into the summaries. In my group, members of this particular cohort
group brought snacks such as peppermint candy and pretzels that they passed around to
all of us when they anticipated having to work especially hard, a practice that they
brought with them from their school. They continued to do this throughout our time
together, and it signaled to me that although they were tired, they ready to participate.
The good humor and caring evidenced by this sub-group energized all of us.

Although the descriptive processes are primarily oral, I assumed that there
possibly were participants who, like me, appreciated graphic organizers or seeing things
written down. That summer I brought chart paper and markers in order to create a visual
map of our thoughts. Writing on the board or on chart paper is not common in the study
group atmosphere of Institute II where people tend to take their own notes. Perhaps the
tradition continued as people from Institute II began to teach Institute I.
On one chart I wrote down a running list of themes and motifs as people noted them in Sean’s visual work. However some members in the group said that they preferred to chart these across his age span so, together, we made two different charts. These charts, along with others, remained taped up on the walls of our classroom, where we could continue to refer to them throughout our time together.

Each night I looked through the work of the previous day and wrote out a summary, using it to begin the next day’s work. As a participant in Institute II, listening to Cecelia Traugh, the director, I learned how to provide direction for the morning’s work by summarizing the major ideas from previous day. As she would say, a summary helps to “hold the thought for the group.” Before we began our work together, I set aside some time for questions and we adjusted the remainder of our time accordingly.

Application and Practice

On Thursday morning, during our usual whole group morning meeting, we set up our three slide projectors in order to simultaneously project work samples from each of the three children. Each instructor selected eighty slides and organized them chronologically so that the children’s work could be seen side-by-side. Our thought was to provide all the participants an opportunity to see some of the work that they had only heard about. Many participants told us they were surprised by the pride they felt when the works of their study child came on the screen. They had spent three and a half days deeply immersed in a nine-year span of the works and records of one child and now felt quite attached. The instructors’ hope was that the morning’s show would place the study children back in the larger context of Prospect School while serving as a reminder of the natural diversity among children.
Meeting with Pat Carini, along with viewing the multi-slide show, helped to draw everyone back to the Institute as a whole. During the final one and a half days of the Institute, participants were able to choose from a number of different sessions. They could present a child's work from their own classrooms, attend a friend's session, read and discuss an article, and in their first free evening, join the Institute II journal writing session.

A few participants were eager to practice chairing. Some were new members of teacher study groups who met regularly to use descriptive review processes while others were attending the Institute for a second time. Participants from Institute II volunteered to act as coaches. Working together, they arranged to meet on their own time with another participant who wanted to practice being a presenter. During their meeting they helped to select a piece of work for description and chose a word for a Reflection. Before the practice presentations, coaches clarified with the new chairs how they could best assist. Generally they briefly intervene to help the chair to sustain the focus of a description or assist in pulling together the final integrative summary. Those participants who were less experienced had the option to co-chair, which mean that they took turns with their coaches leading the rounds of description and summarizing.

As the chair for a Descriptive Review of a Child's Work, I experienced some difficulties of my own that morning. These sessions were intended to provide practice with the descriptive processes and to help clarify questions. This group was unusually large, perhaps fifteen people. Towards the end of our session, one experienced participant urged us to continue a few more turns of going around the circle with descriptive or interpretive comments. I felt we were nearing a more general summing up,
but she insisted that if we “pushed for more, that we would get it.” The newcomers appeared confused and the momentum of our session was slowed by urgent process questions. I thought that there would be even more confusion if we continued.

As it turned out, she was correct. We pressed on, and they "got it" on a level that I would not have anticipated, and in a very short time as well. The feeling I had when I "got it" was similar to that of standing close to an impressionist painting in order to examine the small brush stokes, and then stepping back far enough to perceive the image in its entirety. What first appeared to be a somewhat fragmented piece of writing, when collaboratively read through and described, reading closely line-by-line, was now perceived by the group as a coherent whole. Our first-time presenter was pleased with the comments from the group, and told us how much we had contributed to her understanding of the child. At the same time she was surprised at how much of the child's presence was in the work and available to people who did not know him just through detailed description.

Individuals from all three of the child study groups attended the session, so I knew few of them well. Perhaps I had underestimated the group’s capacity since I was also tired, but the urgent process questions raised during our description were distracting. The range of people's comfort and understanding of Prospect Center's approach could be attributed to many factors, but as it turned out, Brian, Lisa and I would not have much time to sit down afterwards to discuss our teaching. Brian planned on leaving Friday, soon after the participants departed. Meanwhile Lisa and I were anticipating the amount of reading we had to do in order to join the second week of Institute II.
Lately there has been an effort during Institute II to gather former faculty for discussions of what went well and where instruction could be improved. In a close-knit community such as Summer Institute, discussions such as this can be framed using the process of an Issues Conversation, where the role of the chair is to insure that all voices and points of view are heard. During these meetings, notes are taken, copied, and given to those who participated. Taking on the responsibility of teaching the Institute is voluntary and some are not prepared for the demanding nature of the work.

The temptation is to socialize with colleagues from Institute II in the evenings or work late into the night on one's own projects. However teaching Institute I requires one's full attention and extra time in the evening reviewing notes, meeting with participants, or preparing for the next day. Unevenness in instruction can create tension among the faculty, and is an issue that is now being addressed.

The final sessions were scheduled for the afternoon. Brian chaired a close reading of, "Building on Children's Strengths," by Pat Carini (1986). Libby, volunteering from Institute II, offered a workshop on how to chair. She had selected the word “chocolate” for a Reflection and provided appropriate snacks for the topic. I chaired a Close Reading of an article by Peggy McIntosh (1989), "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." Earlier that year I had read Lisa Delpit's (1995), *Other People's Children,* and I was interested in how a multi-racial group would respond to this article.

Our group of nine participants included two men, one of whom was African American and the other white. Of the remaining women, one was Asian American, one was Dominican, and two others were African American. The three remaining, including myself, were white. In her article, McIntosh (1989) expands the notion of male privilege
to include “unearned skin privilege” and “conferred dominance” (p. 10) and provides numerous examples of daily experience that she, as a white person, had taken for granted. For example, entering a specialty shop in a white suburban neighborhood to buy a birthday card for a friend and not being scrutinized or never being asked to speak for all the people of her racial group.

After a brief Reflection on the word, “privilege,” we took turns reading aloud passages that they had marked as standing out to them in some way, and began by selecting one for closer examination. We continued using a process known as Close Reading which involves line by line paraphrasing. Analogous to the process of a Descriptive Review, the conversation moves towards more interpretation at the end of the session. African American members of the group gave accounts of their own experiences, similar to those described in the article. At one point we heard that participants were stopped by police officers in Vermont for no apparent reason other than the color of their skin, known as, DWB, or driving while Black. Midway through our session, the discussion turned to issues of color within the African American community and the privileges accorded to those with lighter skin.

As the chair, I had to negotiate the strong, sometimes tearful, moments of our session, but I found it helpful to ground our discussion in the ideas raised by Peggy McIntosh’s article, along with her strong reminder to the white people in our group to be much more aware of what we take for granted. Our session ended with a conversation about the implications of her article for our work with colleagues, children, and their families. The fact that this session was structured by a process and chaired, helped to create a safe and caring space where, working together, we could begin the difficult
conversation about discrimination and exclusion through the Close Reading of a
provocative text.

Bringing it Home

In only four and a half days the participants became familiar with one child’s
entire school file, learned and practiced a number of descriptive processes, attended
sessions convened by their peers, made a presentation, or chaired a session. That evening
there was no assignment other than to pack their belongings and write their evaluations.
Some participants chose to join Institute II’s Thursday evening journal session where they
found a quiet a half hour to write, followed by voluntary writing shares of short excerpts
from their entries.

On the last morning of the Institute, participants met with their school or a cohort
groups to discuss how they might use collaborative, descriptive processes to support
children in their own classrooms. Instructors quietly circulated among the groups
meeting in different rooms and listened in on their conversations. One group of
participants began their conversation by talking about favorite art projects from their own
school days. In another group I heard people comparing their favorite pens and how their
choices in pens and paper influenced the ease with which they could write. The
discussion then proceeded to the kinds of choices, in provisioning as well as in content,
available to children in their classrooms.

Most of the teachers attending this Institute taught in public schools and
institutions where the curriculum was mandated and where standardized testing
prevailed. As we joined them in their small groups, we encouraged them to think about
the ways in which they could begin to make small changes in at least part of each school
day. It might be to offer a specific project time, to rearrange the classroom in order to make materials more available, or to involve the children in discussions around how to shape a small group inquiry.

After the break we assembled in the dormitory living room for a whole group Reflection on the word, “voice.” As we listened, participants spoke of many things: people singing with one voice; finding your voice in writing; listening to the voices of others in your head; voices shouting in hate; silencing yourself in order to hear others; and giving children voices.

**Participant Evaluations**

After participants departed, Lisa, Brian and I took some time to read through the group's evaluations. We were interested to see how each participant had come to her own understanding of the Institute. Our focus had been how collaborative descriptions of student-generated work helped to make children’s preferences, capacities, and knowledge more available to their teachers at the Prospect School. From our collective past experience, we knew that most people were not accustomed to the formality and the deliberate slow pace of descriptive inquiry.

Many responses noted how surprised they were by what they could learn about a child, as a person, through the close description of a number of work samples. While most of them mentioned the satisfaction they experienced as they explored new approaches and ideas with others, they also stressed that they hadn’t anticipated that it would be such hard work. On the other hand, participants enjoyed being in Vermont on the Bennington campus, able to join their colleagues away from their schools. They also
felt welcomed: “I like the idea of being surrounded by Institute II participants. It was helpful, reassuring and protective.”

Responses to learning and using formal descriptive inquiry processes varied. Most people were positive, for example one person wrote that it was a “non-threatening way of communicating with others,” and she appreciated “the pacing of go-'rounds so all could speak and be heard.” However one person felt that: “The round-robin technique makes you talk when you may not want to contribute anything. You come up with something to say just so you won't look like you didn't want to participate in the discussion.” Initial frustration with the deliberate slow pace was also evident in this response: “At first the child study seemed like over-kill, but it was necessary in order to gain the understanding of the descriptive process in general.”

As a faculty, we worked hard to maintain the balance of instruction in groups with such a diverse professional range. Participants found that they couldn't assume that others understood what it meant to work with at a particular level: “Mixing all grade levels taught enriched my perspective and demonstrated the need for clarity.” One person wrote about how much they appreciated “listening to many different types of people,” while another "liked being part of an on-going reflective collaborative.” A cohort leader wrote: “Conversations about process were crucial and the clarity about 'why' and 'how' one piece related to the larger body of work was important.” Another leader encouraged us to: “Please continue to framing the "meta" stuff. Why we're doing what we're doing. How we've experienced particular activities. Make more explicit the purposes and principles of the work.”
Relating the Institute to their teaching practice was important to many participants. For example one person wrote: "This will change how I look at children and their work right from the beginning of the school year." However, there is little time in such a brief Institute to address the larger implications of descriptive inquiry. Attending Institute II the following summer might be the next step for the person who wrote: "More about implications for curriculum planning and implementing amidst the 'standards movement,' frameworks, etc." There she would have the necessary time to pursue her own questions.

As Lieberman and Grolnick (1996) noted in their study, the viability of a teacher network depends on the infusion of ideas and energy from newcomers. Only a few participants of Institute I go on to enroll in Institute II the following summer. It is more common for participants to return to take Institute I again where they assume more responsibility for chairing a descriptive session or coaching a newcomer. When participants have young families, it is easier to attend the five days of Institute I than the more demanding two weeks of Institute II. In the meantime, they can attend Prospect Center's annual November Conference to reconnect with ongoing topics from the summer and to practice using a variety of descriptive processes.

The Summer Institute on Descriptive Process offers newcomers an opportunity to meet and join with others from different backgrounds and professional levels in thoughtful collaboration. Because of the disciplined description of the review process, their interactions during the sessions were formalized in ways that were new to many of them. By the afternoon of the second day, however, there was a quality of excitement in their engagement as they noted recognizable elements such as themes and motifs or
characteristic use of line and color in the works of their study children. Towards the final
sessions, their understanding of review processes was visible in how they presented work
from their own classrooms and in their participation. It often takes until the end of an
Institute, when they are joined by volunteers from Summer Institute II who help them
prepare presentations, before participants realize that their instructors are also
volunteering. Before that they are too busy. The existence of a non-hierarchical,
collaboratively run study group is intriguing enough so that some of them elect to return.

The hope is that participants leave the Institute with an understanding of
why it is important to keep open the possibilities of meaningful choices for children and
the variety of ways in which to it can be accomplished. Becoming immersed in an in-
depth spanning study of one child they became aware of how a richly provisioned
environment provides opportunities for interaction with a variety of expressive mediums.
Noticing their child's emergent themes and motifs, preferences for expressive mediums,
and ways in of making meaning, they have an opportunity to better understand how
knowledge of each student informs the teachers' instructional choices and how they
developed activities that built on the children's strengths. Juxtaposing the rich knowledge
that arises from disciplined description of individual children and their works and the test
scores or prescriptive special educational plans with which most of participants are
familiar may help participants resist the increasingly narrowing view of schooling that
excludes so many children. Children like Sean.
CHAPTER THREE

CLOSE READING: A THIRD SPACE

There's this freshness and newness that comes to the print that is very, very appealing to me. It's as though my senses are awakened—like the grass seems greener, the sky bluer and language seems much richer. I have a real deep appreciation for that. For me—it's a third space.

-Janette

Over the last twenty-five years, a descriptive process of systematically describing and interpreting a variety of texts gradually evolved into what Prospect Center refers to as Close Reading. This descriptive process has become one of the central ways in which Summer Institute II engages with the theme or topic of study, such as the summer of 1999's “Finding Political Ground: Knowledge, Authority, Action.” Over the span of Institutes, the process of Close Reading has been used to look at children’s writing, works of fiction, poetry, biographies, speeches, essays, notes, journal entries, and articles.

Generally the texts for the morning seminars are assigned in advance of a session with the expectation that participants will become familiar with the content and will pre-select passages that interest them. Readings for the morning seminars in 1999 were Isaiah Berlin’s, The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History and Alfred North Whitehead’s, “Lecture Two: Expression," in Modes of Thought. A second list of suggested readings was designated for literature study groups which traditionally begin the second week of the Institute. Readings for the small groups are selected from a list recommended by participants and provide another entry point into the summer’s inquiry questions. Often two selections with a similar topic but different perspective are paired.
People read one or more selections from this list and then sign up for a specific group after they arrive. Those groups generally meet for three consecutive mornings. The selections for the literature study groups were: *The Reader* and *Fragments*; *Dakota* or *Badland* and "The Country of the Mind" from *Arctic Dreams*; *Lincoln at Gettysburg*; *Dreams of My Russian Summers*; *Teacher with a Heart* and "Letter from Birmingham Jail;" and *Song of the Simple Truth*.

I joined a group of participants who had signed up to discuss Bernhard Schlink’s, *The Reader*, paired with Binjamin Wilkomirski’s controversial Holocaust memoir, *Fragments*. Keeping in mind the Institute’s beginning Reflection on the words, “real/reality,” we discussed the two books and their references to the Holocaust. Using Close Reading, we looked at how *The Reader* depicted the societal expectations and cultural values of post-war Germany through the evolving relationship of the two main characters. In this novel the narrator recalls his adolescent relationship with an older woman before the war and his later encounter with her when she is on trial after the war. The story centers around the implications of her illiteracy for her work and their relationship.

**The Process of Close Reading**

A session generally begins with a Reflection on a Word which pertains to the text. Beginning in this way focuses the group and provides a kind of shared territory for thinking about the reading selection. Each participant generates and writes down a list of words, images and phrases that come to mind, and reads them aloud in turn around the circle. Afterwards the chair briefly summarizes the main ideas, noting their relationships and how they fall into clusters. Participants are then invited to give their first impressions.
of the piece, which is again followed by a brief summary of these statements by the chair before the group selects specific passages to read more in depth. Selected passages are generally read aloud in their entirety before line-by-line reading begins in order to give the group a sense of the whole piece.

People then take turns around a circle reading a line or phrase, and paraphrasing, starting at the beginning and proceeding to the end of a passage. Sometimes when it is their turn, people will return to an earlier section to build on a previous paraphrase or to differ with what was said. After each round, the chairperson gives a brief integrative summary of participants' comments, gradually moving the group from description and paraphrasing towards interpretation based on the evidence gathered from the text. In order to maintain a focus, there is no cross talk or discussion on the reading itself. If people think of a comment or response when it isn't their turn, it is suggested that they write it down so they can address it in the next round. Over-arching assumptions or suppositions are generally discouraged by the chair. Probably most surprising to newcomers is that fact that the same respectful process is used to describe the writing of children as well as of adults. More detailed accounts of participants engaged in a Reflection on a Word can be found in other sections of this dissertation, while the process itself can be found in the Appendices.

Close Reading of "A Sense of Reality"

Earlier that week, meeting in small groups, we had participated in a Reflection on the words, "real/reality," followed by extended individual Recollections around the same words. The previous morning, a seminar led by Cecelia Traugh and Patricia Carini had provided a synopsis of the Institute's history of readings by Berlin. Now eight of us were
convened for a close reading of Berlin’s, “A Sense of Reality.” The range of professional experience within the group was typical of Summer Institute, and included elementary teachers, a preschool teacher, two university professors, and a high school teacher.

Our morning began in a small meeting room on the second floor of the red Carriage Barn. Originally the carriage barn for the estate which is now Bennington College, it has been converted for multiple uses. Each of the three small groups were assigned a chairperson and approximately ten participants for two days of work on the Isaiah Berlin selection. Several of us helped to set up a seating arrangement where we could easily see one another, closer to the comfortable couch near the back wall. All of us had brought with us our marked-up copies with pre-selected passages either underlined or highlighted. Our chairperson, Cory, then began our session.

We’re assuming that people have read the text—and not assuming perfect understanding. So would someone like to start us off? Who would like to share their passage, talk a little bit about it? We can add in some comments, and move to the next one. OK Janette, where are you?

Janette’s began by providing a brief context for her passage, noting Berlin’s preceding statements around the use of language. She then told us the page number and read aloud this passage:

And yet what makes men foolish or wise, understanding or blind, as opposed to knowledgeable or learned or well informed, is the perception of these unique flavours of each situation as it is, in its specific differences—of that in it wherein it differs from all other situations, that is, those aspects of it which make it unsusceptible to scientific treatment, because it is that element in it which no generalisation, because it is a generalisation, can cover (Berlin, p. 25).

She had been reading *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, by Gary Wills in preparation for the next week’s literature discussion group, so it was not unexpected that she would have made
this text to text connection as she was reading the Berlin. It was the quality of Lincoln’s
decision making under pressure that intrigued her.

Before he mentioned Lincoln, Lincoln had come up in my head around what
he said about being able to know the uniqueness of each situation, to be able
to see the differences, of what he calls the “flavors” of the immediate
situation. That’s where the wisdom lies and there’s no scientific formula for
that. And so I thought of Lincoln, and I thought of historical figures who had
the sense of knowing something that was very unique about that moment—
who had a kind of wisdom—although some people might dispute it, about
handling that particular moment.

After adding in a bit more about Lincoln, she linked the passage to her work in urban
high schools supervising consultants for an urban writing program. She worried that the
intentions and actions of administrators were not grounded in the reality of the school
settings she visits.

There is a particular school leader who doesn’t know anything about handling
the staff and working with this population of students. It’s as though he’s
smart, he’s intelligent, he’s well educated, and a real gentleman, but he
doesn’t use a kind of common sense to notice the differences in each situation
and then use those differences to help them. So the school is a kind of failing,
non-functional school that will probably be taken over by the state.

Reading Berlin provided Janette with other ways of looking at the issues and
educational policies of the urban school high schools in which she works. While she
realized that the decisions handed down through educational bureaucracies disregard the
unique characteristics of individual schools and their larger communities, she was
determined to support the people that she supervises. Janette then returned to the Berlin
passage, noting the beneficial effects of action informed by knowledge.

After listening to what each member of the group had chosen for selected
passages, Cory, as our chair, took a few minutes to determine where to begin the line-by-
line reading and reviewed the process of Close Reading with us. She reminded us not to
take too big of a chunk of text, but rather a phrase or an idea, saying that reading the passage aloud before paraphrasing it would be helpful for everyone. When passages seemed especially complex or difficult, people stopped to ask questions or to seek reassurance that they had paraphrased correctly. Twice Cory paused in the process to talk a bit about Berlin and to relate particular passages to readings from previous Summer Institutes. Situating this essay in the larger context of Institute inquiry topics was helpful for all of us, and particularly for newcomers.

Factors such as the focus of the work, the time available for meeting, and the nature of the text determine how a chair and participants decide to proceed during a Close Reading. For example, after reading through several passages, Cory said we might select one “as an arrow to the entire document,” so that participants would focus their comments “in relation to their annotations of the text as a whole.” When the comments in our group seemed vague or the group was unable to understand the paraphrases, we returned to more line-by-line description. Staying as close to the text as possible is integral to the process. According to Carini, “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” (Prospect, 2002, p. 49).

To conclude our session, Cory summarized the day’s work, related the essay back to the larger topic of the Institute, “Finding Political Ground: Knowledge, Inquiry, Action,” and made some suggestions to keep in mind for the following day. Afterwards the notes of all the summaries were handed into Cory who would use them, along with her own, to prepare the over-view that would begin tomorrow’s whole group meeting.
before small groups adjourned to the next Berlin session. She views these morning
meeting summaries as a way of “holding the thinking” for the group, reflecting back to
them their ideas in order to open up new directions of inquiry.

Summer Institute has traditionally drawn on a variety of sources such as the
Berlin reading to reframe the discussion of policy issues around democratic schooling,
equitable access to quality schools and funding, and sustaining community involvement.
Creating an array of available texts around a given topic provides a variety of entry points
from which participants can choose. For example, Brian claims that readings from
essayists such as Isaiah Berlin are inspirational and keeps this quote from “The Sense of
Reality” taped to his closet door at school.

. . . to claim to be able to construct generalizations where at best we can only
indulge in the art of exquisite portrait painting, to claim the possibility of
some infallible scientific key where each entity demands a lifetime of minute,
devoted observation, sympathy, insight, is one of the most grotesque claims
ever made by human beings (pp. 20-21).

When I sent out an e-mail query about Close Reading, Brian’s reply addressed
how he felt the readings related to the ways in which he observed and described the
children in his classroom. Drawing on Berlin, Brian sees each of us as having a visible
public persona that expresses characteristics that are similar to those of others, making it
possible to be characterized, categorized and, in short, abstracted. Within each of us,
however, is an interior that is less visible.

To make unwarranted generalizations based primarily on the visible public level
is, according to Berlin, “a grotesque claim.” Brian sees Berlin’s assertion in his teaching
when he is asked to administer standardized tests that do not take into account the
particularities of how his students make meaning or communicate what they know, yet
have the power to adversely affect their future. He prefers, instead, to use processes that result in the kind of “exquisite portrait painting” that Berlin admires in the work of novelists, “where each unique identity demands devoted observation, sympathy, [and] insight.” Brian connects that disciplined inquiry with the Prospect Center process, The Descriptive Review of a Child, noting that looking at one child in depth “helps us to ‘plumb the depths’ with others because it is the way of looking that makes the difference.” He draws on the novels that we have read together over the years as he writes up his observation of the children in his classrooms. Inspired by Berlin and other common readings from Summer Institute, Brian continues to be an outspoken advocate in his school for alternative assessment models that support children and inform parents.

For Me— It’s a Third Space

Recurring throughout my conversations about Close Reading with participants was the notion that while Summer Institute was a place in which thinking and ideas mattered, it was also assumed that ordinary teachers from all levels had the capacity to work with texts from-wide ranging sources. Brian recalled how reading novels such as The Dollmaker and The Plague during the Institute were his introduction to this kind of reading.

We were not looking for summations, for tidy categorization related to symbol systems or archetypes. We were not even looking for surface features such as character motivation or the author’s philosophy of life. Because we start with the language at the concrete level of the paraphrase, we are grounded in the particular. There is an analogy here to our grounding of the description of the person in the physical. The practice of this kind of close reading ... gives us opportunities to engage in description... The paragraph may have to suffice and to give us the way of seeing which helps us to at least make our ways through the dense waters of the whole work (Personal correspondence, 2/21/01).
Since literature discussion groups meet over three consecutive days for the entire morning, people have the time to linger over selected pages and to go deeply into the text, occasionally stopping to do line-by-line close reading. Years later I still remember the sections that our group read aloud from Toni Morrison’s Beloved, particularly the lyrical passages that describe the Middle Passage.

Arielle, an elementary teacher, recalled the Institutes during the late seventies and early eighties when she read Heidegger, Barfield, and Merleau-Ponty during the same Institute as A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. She went on to talk about how unusual it was to assume that ordinary school teachers would be interested in and able to engage with this kind of content, “Nothing I’d ever experienced any place else before was quite like that.” She appreciated how the ideas from the lectures and the readings provided a broader context for examining her practice. The shared readings and vocabulary influenced the ways in which participants observed the children in their classrooms, as well as how they wrote up their observations in their teacher journals. Some of those journals became the basis for publications. During my investigations participants frequently stressed that the quality of their thinking was enhanced in general, attributing their present comfort in exploring new ideas to the respect and trust that they experienced attending collaborative description sessions. As Jory put it, “You don’t have to worry ‘Do I have an idea?’ because they think you do, so you must!”

During one small group conversation about why people continue to return to the Summer Institute each year, Janette brought up the example of reading another selection by Toni Morrison, her acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize. When Janette attended a national literacy network conference she was part of a group that performed sections of
the speech. Reading it again at Prospect, using the Close Reading process, she told us, “It’s as though I never read it before.” The support of the small group and the deliberate pace of the inquiry process enabled her to slow down and to go more deeply into the material.

There's this freshness and newness that comes to the print that is very, very appealing to me. It's as though my senses are awakened--like the grass seems greener, the sky bluer and language seems much richer. I have a real deep appreciation for that. For me--it's a third space.

Newcomers

When newcomers enter Institute II, they tend to feel self-conscious participating in sessions alongside participants whose articles they may have read, such as Janette or Lisa. Esmeralda, no longer a newcomer, initially worried about how she might be perceived as a thinker. A writer herself, a “kitchen table poet,” she enjoys giving copies of her poems to friends and uses her journal to reflect on her experiences, prepare for sessions, and afterwards, respond to the topics of the seminars.

In a section of her journal Esmeralda articulated something that other participants also expressed, the tension between feelings of inadequacy around the readings of the Institute and the recognition that there is something of importance to be discovered if one perseveres. She writes, “The most important reason that I come is that I really have to push myself. I really have to stretch... I get to find new parts of myself and try them out.” The collaborative nature of descriptive inquiry processes has been deliberately structured to facilitate the entry of newcomers into the discussions. Esmeralda, along with others, talked about how other participants supported them with sensitivity and caring when they were struggling to articulate their thoughts. Each summer Esmeralda
returns to Prospect to create the space for herself to reflect on her work as an urban educator in an experimental school.

Nell, in recalling her experience as a newcomer, noted that she was drawn to the eclectic and difficult readings as well, along with the slow, descriptive nature of the Close Reading process. Teaching in a small rural school, Nell considers herself “A lone Prospector” and counts on the Institute and its participants as a forum for her thoughts and support for her practice.

It's hard to explain, because it feels like such a dichotomy, to feel so lost in it, but at the same time to feel so at home. Like I'd found a place, that if I could just keep coming and sort of get a better handle on what it was, it was going to be from home.

Judy, who has been a participant since the eighties, told me a story about her recent experience with a spontaneous study group of newcomers. After dinner they were talking in the living room about the Isaiah Berlin session that they had attended that morning, admitting that they felt unprepared to participate in the continued reading of the selection the next day. Judy, who had been passing through on the way to her room, stopped and talked with them for awhile, explaining that even as a college professor, she also found the selection challenging. She told them that she had spent part of the afternoon outlining the assigned pages and then diagramed a few of the paragraph length sentences in order to get at the clauses. Afterwards she offered to stay if the group wanted to read through the piece together.

The five participants returned to the living room with Berlin’s, “Chapter 1, The Sense of Reality” in hand to prepare for the next morning. Judy noted that each person contributed to the group’s discussion in a particular way. Esmeralda, an early childhood teacher and a poet, approached the piece by stripping away, what she felt were the
extraneous words to get to each main idea. Lee, an elementary school administrator, joined her in looking for the larger concepts, while Jeremy, a former policeman and EMT, struggled with the complex syntax and wondered aloud how this reading would relate to his elementary teaching. Marta, another early childhood teacher, was determined to understand how the ideas embedded within each paragraph related to one another, all the while remarking on Berlin’s rich literary style.

As I listened to Judy talk about how each of the participants went about approaching their work together, I could imagine her encouraging them to persevere as they focused on the metaphors Berlin uses to illustrate his points. They worked together for nearly two hours, after which they made a trip into town for ice cream, opened the several cartons of Haagen Dazs ice cream, grabbed spoons, and passed the cartons around the circle before turning in for the night.

Living together in the dormitory creates a setting where conversations enable people to informally follow up on a session, or for a spontaneous group to form around a particular topic. Because Lee and Marta were friends, they were comfortable disclosing the difficulty they had in understanding Berlin’s particularly dense text, and their comments, in turn, provided an opening for others to join in the conversation. Judy has always enjoyed working through readings and was happy to draw on her own preparations to encourage the others. Generally, most spontaneous gatherings, such as the one described, remain open to others. If another participant had chanced to overhear the discussion while walking through the living room, she could have easily joined in as well, because of the open, friendly nature of the Institute.
How Do You Keep Talking about Children and Children’s Possibilities

When No One Is Listening?

The last Friday afternoon is traditionally set aside to craft a kind of personal integrative summary of one’s experience of the Institute. Structuring in the time for reflection communicates to participants that they are regarded as thinkers, and that their thoughts and ideas are valued. The section which follows is meant to give a sense of the Friday afternoon session from the 1998 Institute, “Finding Political Ground: Knowledge, Inquiry and Authority.”

As with the other kinds of descriptive process used by Prospect Center, there is no cross talk so that each person can have at least ten full minutes of uninterrupted time to speak. Given the complexity of the assignment, to speak extemporaneously without distraction requires quiet and attentive listening on the part of participants. People are encouraged to take notes, so time is allocated at the end of the session for additions and comments. Afterwards, the chairperson briefly summarizes in order to cluster the main ideas. Notes from the various small groups are then turned into the director who uses them as a reference for the final Saturday session.


Participants prepared for the second week’s literature discussion groups by reading at least two of the following: The Life of Poetry, by Muriel Rukeyser; Lincoln at Gettysburg, by Gary Wills; Regeneration, by Pat Barker and “Adversary Proceedings”

Carrying copies of my notes and readings, I joined the others in our assigned groups of six. The chairperson began the session by asking us to use our materials to trace what was of interest to us, both personally and professionally, and to make note of the various connections and larger ideas that cut across the sessions. The room quieted as people settled into reading through their papers while jotting notes—a respite from two weeks of intense oral inquiry.

After a half hour or so, the chair asked for a volunteer. Irene began by tracing the thread of something she called, “becoming an elder.” This, it turned out, was an ongoing informal topic among several long-time participants who were nearing retirement. She was particularly interested in Lopez’s depiction of the few Native American elders who remain to carry on the traditions and language of their cultures. Turning to the Descriptive Reviews in her Child Study group, she felt as if the boy in their group had become, in effect, his own elder because he was on his own so much of the time.

Moving on to talk about the works she read in the Rukeyser literature group, she remarked that as she read the “The Gates,” she realized her own fear of taking a political stand and recited the line, “Air fills with fear.” Then she went on to speak in what seems almost like her own prose poem. “I’ve been thinking about how deeply communal air is. . . The air moves on breath and wind with no boundaries, and just as the air fills with the fear we exhale into it, it also fills with the courage. We can inhale that courage from each other and we do.”
What especially struck Irene was Rukeyser’s notion of values having obligating power. Reflecting on her own life in light of Rukeyser’s resistance during the Korean War, she wrote in the margin of her transcript copy: “I always bring Prospect home with me. The ideas remake my vision of my past. My past changes: paradox!” Many of the people in Irene’s Rukeyser group, myself included, were reminded of other readings over the years that link knowledge with action. Rukeyser seemed to be saying that, while knowledge leads to the formation of values, which in turn imply moral choices, those values also have obligating powers. With authority, grounded in that knowledge, she felt it was imperative to act. Irene also connected becoming an elder with an obligation to remain active in her field and to mentor other newer teachers with whom she worked.

Arielle spoke next and incorporated references to several of Irene’s anecdotes in her own presentation. During her group’s reading of Regeneration, she had found herself recalling the Institute when she read The Plague. To her, both works address the question of “What to do about the implacable evil in the world, and how you confront it?” She related this question to Rukeyser’s statement that honesty is not enough, that thinking about it, talking to others is still not enough, but that one should acknowledge the “evil in the world” and make it public. In contrast, she felt that Regeneration depicts the opposite, “the dishonesty, the hiddenness of so much of what was going on that was the cause of incalculable pain, hardship, and torment.” Arielle then went on to link the works of Rukeyser with Williams’s The Long Revolution, explaining that, “we have to keep in mind the common needs of all humanity, and that when common needs are ignored, the special needs are served.” Arielle’s particular interest that summer was in tracing the strand of the relationship of the individual not only to the immediate
community, but to the larger community of the world, over time. She ended by reminding us of Kundera’s conception of history, “that we do not play out our lives against an historical backdrop, but that history is also one of the actors; it is all of a piece.”

The starting place for Brian’s review of the Institute was a comparison of Lincoln and Lopez in terms of location and the ideal. He touched on Irene’s thread of becoming an elder, “In traditional societies the elder would have been the person who was the repository of memory... not the kind of regard for the elder in the increasingly homogeneous society in which we live now” and related it to how Lopez and Kundera depict the eroding of certain values and the resulting ethical dilemma. He posed the question, “What is it to lose a sense of the local? Yet that is the place upon which most people can take a stand, can have a voice.”

Brian cited Lisa’s Review of Practice as an example of building on local knowledge and gathering the support to make public statements. He sensed that her decisions to take action were grounded in the strong relationships that she had with parents, and that working together, they affected incremental, but important, changes in their urban school system. He ended by returning to Kundera’s phrase, “We are a moment in the world,” adding that we are all in the world together, and that through collaborative descriptive practices, we help one another to broaden the frame of our individual viewpoints in order to take a more informed and united stand.

Jenny, one of the youngest in the group, was interested in the possibilities of transformation. She saw Kundera’s “Dialogue on the Art of the Novel,” as a warning that the disintegration of values in society would result in a narrowing of possibilities.
She considered *The Rediscovery of North America*, with its call to action, as a response to Kundera. Jenny thought that *Regeneration*, while it depicted the polarization of a society in wartime, also held out the possibility of a new generation as the old order was destroyed. To her, the Williams piece also looked toward a society of freely cooperating individuals, offering synthesis and integration rather than polarization.

Jenny talked about her own Recollection from the beginning of the Institute when small groups met around the notion of “emergent perspective.” Each individual was asked to identify a lasting outlook, the way she tended to perceive her experiences, and to ground that in particular examples from her life. In her preparations for the Recollection Jenny discovered that she often sought “to see the connections in various ideas, places, and people.” She ended by saying that Lopez piece inspired her to think about slowing her pace in order to find her “querenzia,” that is, something she loved deeply, so that she could “hold it up for herself and others as a possibility for transformation.”

Randy, in contrast to Jenny, was looking towards retirement. Like Irene, she was also interested in the obligations attendant on becoming an elder and used the readings as a context for reflecting on her professional experience as an urban educator.

How am I integrating my life and my work? How do you keep talking about children and children’s possibilities when no one is listening? And what that feels like to continue facing that question over and over again. Is that the story I want to tell about my life?

She noted how reading the Williams piece helped her to see how the language she used to speak about her work influenced her perceptions. Randy recalled a piece by Eric Heller that we read in the early eighties where he says, in effect,” be careful how you interpret the world; it is that way.” She also referred to the Institute’s beginning Recollection and how Janette’s account of growing up on a Caribbean Island exemplified...
what Lopez meant when he spoke of the importance of location and elders as bearers of tradition and culture.

Listening to the personal connections that people made to the ideas addressed over the two weeks, I could hear where there were commonalities and shared values, but it was the diversity in perspective, preference, and interpretation that provided me with new things to think about as I left. I wanted to reread sections from Lopez and Kundera, and to borrow *Claiming Breath*, a book I had yet to read.

Later, in reading through the transcripts, I could trace how one person’s comments often triggered new ideas and connections in the others. For example, as each person followed Irene, they incorporated bits from the previous speaker, building upon themes and extending them in their own remarks. There were also differences. Although Jenny and Arielle both read Regeneration, the thirty year difference in their ages and in their personal histories caused them to bring forward different aspects of the book. Individuals also used examples drawn from the summer’s Child Study, Review of Practice and Recollections and linked them to concepts that were originally introduced through the essays and literature studies.

**Summary**

Although Close Reading is one of many descriptive processes used during the Institute, the frequency with which it is applied and the ways it is used in conjunction with other ways of describing, make it a foundational processes. It is analogous to other review processes in its aim of staying as close as possible to the text. With each succeeding round of unlayering, understandings grow. Meaning is disclosed as the phenomenological description broadens back out. The understanding of individual words
moves from their ordinary usage to their expanded meanings, depending on the level of
the text. Carefully paraphrasing small phrases and situating them within the sentences of
a larger paragraph, helps to differentiate their meanings. Eventually, as the smaller
sections of text become integrated, the linguistic interpretations deepen (Vandenburg,
1974, p. 202). Just as with the Descriptive Review of a Child, understanding may be
partial. As Brian said, “The paragraph may have to suffice and give us the way of seeing
that helps us to at least make our ways through the dense waters of the whole work.”
Before moving on to another longer passage of text, the particular section described is
reinserted into the larger context. When ambiguities arise they are acknowledged and
noted by the chair, and may be revisited in light of later descriptions if there is time.

Close Readings, child studies, descriptions of work, curriculum reviews, personal
recollections, descriptions of practice, literature study, and conversation, eventually
coalesce into what Margaret Himley (1991) refers to as a “shared territory” for
developing thought. In using Bakhtin and Carini as theorists she maintains that
“knowledge becomes dialogic and disputable”... “It calls for a response from others. It
forms and informs and reforms through more talk and experience and writing, across time
and within different settings” (p. 69). In other words, “deep talk” as she defines it is a
kind of research methodology, in that it is “both communal and generalist in a sense,
drawing first (and foremost) upon the profound resources of collective thought and
community... To think, to know, to understand are defined and enacted at Prospect
almost in spatial and temporal terms, as a kind of shared territory that we all can dwell in
together over time, teacher and researcher, old and young, specialist and generalist”
(p. 68).
Close Reading is an intensive process, especially if a child's writing is difficult to decipher, or if the text is multi-layered and complex like the Berlin selection. The sustained focused and immersion in a text necessary for a reflective and careful Close Reading helps to create what Janette refers to as a "third space." Perseverance supported by collaborative description allows participants to venture into texts they would not read on their own. Through repeated sessions, their skills build as they make text-to-text connections with previous selections and personal readings. Working in this manner over a period of many years has generated an wide ranging collection of readings that continues to serve a resource for ideas and thinking in the broadest sense about "What is it to teach?" or "What is it to educate a person?"
CHAPTER FOUR

DRAWING AS DESCRIPTION

Alfred North Whitehead’s, “Creative Impulse,” in *Modes of Thought* was the assigned reading for the second week of the Institute II. This chapter begins with a vignette of several individuals on a Sunday preparing for the upcoming session. Two portrayals follow: a Close Reading of the Whitehead chapter, and an afternoon inquiry session that builds on the work of the morning. One of the questions framing the inquiry was: When does description become inquiry? The group alternates drawing and verbal description of a feather, ending with a discussion. The intention was that our readings from Whitehead, particularly his notion of expression, would inform our drawing. The discussion explores the experience of drawing-as-description paired with an oral description, and ends with questions about how the relationship between description and inquiry can influence our observations of children.

**A Sunday Vignette: Reading Alfred North Whitehead**

It has been an unusually hot summer, with many days reaching temperatures of ninety degrees or warmer. This year we are assigned to one of the newer Bahaus style dormitories on the Bennington campus. Built into the side of a hill, a distinguishing architectural feature of these buildings is a glass-enclosed tower which was intended to provide passive solar heating during long, cold Vermont winters. Unfortunately for summer residents, it heats even more efficiently on hot, humid days.
Early this Sunday morning three of us sit together on the floor of this tower living room and read Alfred North Whitehead's *Modes of Thought* in preparation for tomorrow's session. This is a spacious room for reading and thinking. The back wall is solid brick with a large fireplace, while the two side walls are floor to ceiling glass sliders with large screens. The upper branches of the maple trees planted on either side provide both privacy and shade. Because of this, some of us refer to this room as, "The Treehouse." It is quiet in the dorm, since many people have gone off to the annual Vermont Craft Fair in nearby Manchester. Fortified with food and ice water we settle into our readings.

This is Melissa's first summer, while Danielle and I have attended Prospect for almost twenty years. We read silently for some time until Danielle begins to read aloud. She then rereads the same passage: "A tree sticks to its business of mere survival; and so does an oyster with some minor divergencies" (Whitehead, p. 43). Melissa looks relieved, then laughs and ventures a comment. We continue to puzzle together through two sections of the chapter by reading aloud, discussing, and even charting some key concepts on large sheets of paper taped to the fireplace. By late afternoon we are more confident. We have jotted down notes and selected either favorite or difficult passages that we will bring to our small group discussions tomorrow.

Working together like this sustains my focus in the building heat. The temptation is to succumb to a pleasant state of drowsiness, but we are here because we didn't have time to read the assignment in advance of the Institute. After a busy summer packing up my classroom, and moving to start a new school, there has been little time for reading. Melissa, the principal of a small alternative school in New York City, was equally busy,
and she too is not prepared. Danielle is reviewing Whitehead. She once drove from New York City to North Bennington each week for ten weeks to attend a Whitehead study group meeting. Now she is happily rereading and coaching us. By five o’clock the “Treehouse” has become too hot to work, despite the shading maples, and we descend from our tower to join the others who are returning for dinner.

**Monday Morning Session**

We spent Monday morning in small group sessions engaged in a Close Reading of Whitehead. We paid particular attention to those sections pertaining to expression where he writes, for example, “In every grade of social aggregation, from a nonliving material society up to a human body there is the necessity for expression” (Whitehead, p. 39). Since one of the most widely used processes from Prospect Center is The Descriptive Review of a Child, we were interested in looking at what Whitehead might call, “the expressivity” of a child in a variety of settings and circumstances. In the guidelines for the Review process expressivity comes under the particular heading “Physical Presence and Gesture.” A child’s or adolescent’s gestures become familiar when we look at a body of work collected over time. The gesture resides in the recognizable quality of a line, a brush stroke, or in the elements of composition. We can notice how a child moves about the classroom or outdoors, and listen for characteristic phrases along with tone and volume. When a teacher presents a Descriptive Review of the child, the quality of her description will enhance the likelihood of receiving recommendations that match the child’s needs.
During our session that morning we carefully paraphrased several paragraphs from the Whitehead piece, however, participants found the following one to be especially appealing:

The animals evolved and emphasized the superficial aspects of their connexity with nature, and thus obtained a manageable grip upon the world. The central organism which is the soul of a man is mainly concerned with the trivialities of human existence. It does not easily meditate upon the activities of fundamental bodily functions. Instead of fixing attention on the bodily digestion of vegetable food, it catches the gleam of the sunlight as it falls on the foliage. It nurtures poetry. Men are the children of the Universe, with foolish enterprises and irrational hopes. A tree sticks to its business of mere survival; and so does an oyster with some minor divergencies. In this way, the life-aim at survival is modified into the human aim at survival for diversified worth-while experience.

Over the years the last few lines have become a touchstone for the Institute, a belief that, given the right circumstances, all children would aim for "diversified worth-while experience."

**Tuesday Breakfast**

All groups come together as summer residents over breakfast and dinner, and while it is an informal time, conversations about Institute topics continue. Bennington College houses several diverse groups during the summer: an accelerated high school program, the Chamber Music Group, Art New England, South American anthropologists, and Prospect Center. The dining hall is a typical New England red brick building, complete with a white cupola and covered in ivy. After passing through cafeteria lines, there is a choice of two dining rooms or the white wooden balcony on the second floor. On warm days, diners take their trays out on the balcony to sit at the numerous wooden picnic tables lining the wall and admire the spectacular view of the mountains to the west. This morning’s conversations are about the assigned readings in Whitehead.
One of the advantages of holding the Institute at Bennington is the fact that we are not isolated on campus as teachers, but are part of a lively arts-based summer community. Although Prospect participants tend to eat meals with one another, over the years, we have been joined by resident artists and musicians. For example, I once breakfasted on the balcony with a cellist from the New York Philharmonic. After learning that I was a teacher, he told me that, as a young child, he had to help rebuild his German school after World War II using the rubble from surrounding bombed out buildings. He presently volunteers in a program working with inner city schools as part of his orchestra’s outreach program, and returns to Bennington each summer to teach and perform.

Today four of us from the Institute continue the conversation we began over breakfast about the Whitehead reading as we climb the wooden steps to the upper campus. Mist still covers the distant mountains, but will soon burn off since another humid day with temperatures into the nineties is predicted. People carrying violin cases pass us by and split off up the gravel path through the birches to the conservatory. Nearby several oil painters have set up their easels in front of the giant sunflowers in the community garden. In the distance we can see several people from Prospect sitting on the sunny steps outside the science building and we join them.

Gradually, as more people drift over from breakfast, we move inside, stopping first at a refreshment table to fill our mugs with coffee. Inside the classroom a circle of wooden chairs with their one wide arm are already filled with participants. This week’s schedule for afternoon and evening sessions is tacked to the cork wall at the back of the room, along with sign-up sheets. The chalkboards are covered with notices, such as room assignments for small groups, and sign-up spaces for book discussion groups. Small
clusters of people gather in the sign-up areas, talking quietly, while the rest of us exchange morning pleasantries before we convene.

**Tuesday: Morning Meeting**

Each day of the Institute we meet together as a whole group for general announcements, housekeeping issues, and updates. By now people have gravitated toward their preferred seats, Randy by the door so that she can talk to people as they arrive, and Brian near the windows for fresh air. I move to a spot near Carris where the windows open out at ground level.

Our director, Cecelia Traugh, begins the meeting with announcements and an outline of the day to come. She reminds us that this is our second day of working with readings from Whitehead, and tells us that there will be an afternoon session devoted to recollections around documentation in schools. Lee, in charge of shopping for luncheon provisions, tells who has volunteered to prepare a special dish for today. Eliza announces that she has space in her car for a trip to a favorite bookstore in nearby Manchester. Quietly Prospect’s office manager slips in to collect notes and other materials we have left out to make copies. After about twenty minutes we disperse, stopping to refill mugs with coffee and tea before heading off to meet in small groups.

**Small Group Session: The Gesture of a Feather**

My group meets upstairs in the science room. It has a low, rumbling, overheard fan that we cannot turn off, a teaching island with burner hook-ups, and a sink near the door. Across the room, Sybil has clustered chairs in a circle by the windows away from the drone of the fan. There are seven of us and, unlike the other groups meeting this morning, there are no newcomers. Yesterday's session was a Close Reading from the
Whitehead selection, "Creative Impulse." This session will provide another entry point into expression as conceptualized by Whitehead in *Modes of Thought*. When describing expression, Prospect Center processes uses the word, "gesture."

Today we will be describing the gesture of a natural object. As we arrive and settle in, we each place our objects on the wide wooden arm of our chairs and comment on one another's finds. Brian has a small stone, while Judy's flowers sit in a jar of water. For the past few years we have been drawing natural objects, some chosen and some assigned. Last year we selected an object that we found on the campus, and worked alone to portray it in a medium of our choice. The focus of the assignment was to have been the nature of description. We were to notice and record the process by which we translated the visual object into a different medium. The act of translation was also a description, as was the final product in some cases. People got caught up in the assignment, spending hours drawing, painting, making books, writing lyrics and poems. This year was to be different.

Sybil, the chairperson for this session, tells us we will begin by drawing a natural object using a medium of our choice, move on to describe it orally, and follow this exercise with another drawing session. We will conclude with a discussion of how our readings in Whitehead relate to our experiences in this session. Since this is our third summer using drawing as a mode of description, we have all experienced this process during previous Institutes. Adding in a piece from Whitehead, however, is a new element for all of us. Our task is to notice and articulate what happens when we are immersed in the experience of observing and drawing, as well as being attentive to the gesture of the object.
We begin in confusion and misunderstanding. Many of us assumed that each of us would draw our own object, since that is what we have done in past Institutes. Time and care had gone into gathering this collection and some of us were apparently quite attached to our finds. The director’s intent, however, was that each group would decide on one object which everyone would draw. Sybil, our chair, who was part of the initial planning session, also holds fast to the one-object approach. If we all draw the same object then we will have multiple perspectives on one thing so that we can better address issues of description and interpretation. She maintains that we should go around the circle, and that each person should tell about her object as a way of helping us decide which one to draw.

Mine is the first to be eliminated, according to the horticultural expert in the group. It is jimson weed and, although its purple flowers are quite appealing, it is poisonous when handled. Other objects are eliminated because some participants maintain they are too complicated to draw. They claim that their focus would become their frustration over their inability to draw it, instead of the object itself. Finally, after ten minutes of discussion, we settle on the goose feather, that Jenny found on the lakeshore after her swim that morning.

At first I am dismayed by the choice—a nondescript goose feather. My first thought is, “How can I possibly spend one half-hour drawing that?” Some people in our group are more comfortable and experienced with drawing, while others think of themselves as writers. Before we begin, Judy, a college professor and writer of children’s stories, asks to speak. She tells us that her son is a trained artist and while she appreciates what he can do, she is more comfortable using words for description. She
goes on to say that she is just as particular about her writing implements as her son is about his art materials. Using just the right pen and paper for a specific task is very satisfying for her. She apologizes in advance for the anticipated quality of her drawing, but thinks that it is an interesting assignment. Others nod in agreement.

This is the third year of blending drawing and verbal description, a difficult process but one which offers new possibilities for inquiry. The intent is not to produce art, but rather to employ drawing as description. The act of rendering an object requires close observation, alternating between looking and drawing. Although some people rarely draw, they have been persuaded to join others in posting their work in the dorm after past sessions, so, in fact, there is a kind of implied audience in the process. Many of the drawings over the years have been quite evocative, and we have enjoyed seeing one another’s work, much as children in our classrooms delight in seeing one another’s efforts.

Sybil places the feather, curved side up, on a piece of white paper which is set on the broad arm of a chair. The chair is then positioned in the middle of the group so that we can all see it. Soft, northern light from the window projects a faint shadow from the feather, and illuminates its raised portions. Conversation fades as we arrange our materials and set to work. Accustomed to doing warm-up drawings from the art classes I have taken over the years, I get up and make some quick sketches of the feather from several vantage points around the circle, standing as I draw. No one seems to mind. Immersed in their own drawings, they remain seated,

Quick drawings from a variety of perspectives have helped me envision the feather almost as hologram. Feeling more confident now after some warm-up sketches, I
return to my original place for the remainder of the time. In the alternation of looking
and drawing, I note the difference in the quality and texture of each barb as it attaches to
the main shaft. Those at the base are sparse, wide, and wispy in contrast to those at the
tip, which are closely spaced and stiff looking. Using a hard drawing pencil, I begin with
light strokes, then gradually darken and fill in the gentle curving shape of the feather,
finishing with its shadow. Jenny, with pen and ink, slowly traces the outline of each barb
as she works, while Adrienne’s strokes are quick and impressionistic. Using a soft
pencil, she fills in the background with various tones and texture, a contrast to the
uniform, soft shading of the feather.

Sybil, sensing that most of us are finished with this first round, calls for a break,
after which we are to reconvene to describe the feather in words. Before leaving the
room we walk around, looking to see what each person has drawn. There is a range of
artistic expression in the drawings, yet each conveys certain qualities of this particular
feather. Seen from a variety of angles, the upward curve is more or less foreshortened, or
the light plays differently on the shaft and barbs. Some people have shaded in a
background, and others sketched a light shadow where the feather touches the paper. We
leave the classroom, and what Whitehead might call the “insistent particularity” of the
feather, to stretch in the bright Vermont sunshine. The intense visual focus on one small
object somehow transfers to the outside scene and, for awhile, my awareness of each tree
and shifting cloud against the blue of the sky is heightened.

Leaving the increasing humidity and heat of the outdoors, we return to our places
around the circle. Sybil asks us to describe the feather as we pass it around on the paper.
Adhering to the discipline of the descriptive process, we deliberately refrain from
touching it with our hands. Using only our visual sense at first, the aim is to describe the particularity of this feather as if we had never seen a feather before. As a result, these first rounds of description are visual and literal: “The spine is lighter colored at the base and narrows to the top, where it becomes darker.” “The fluffy elements themselves serve as spines for other elements.” “The filaments appear closer to one another at the tip than at the base.” We engage the other senses as we eventually pick it up and turn it over to examine it close at hand: “The light reflects more on this side than the other;” “The barbs seem longer on this side than on the other.” “There is a groove down the middle of the spine which disappears before the end.”

Questions arise as we pass the feather around the circle: “I wonder how this developed?” “Does the curve emerge as it grows?” “How much color does each element actually have?” After several rounds of description, metaphors appear, as more senses are brought in to play: “This side is velvety and the other side is shiny, the way that some insect’s scales are shiny.” The systematic nature of this task is to refrain from making assumptions and to sustain a focus on the particular. We find it difficult to temporarily set aside former experience and knowledge about feathers in general.

When we begin the second round of drawing, I request that this time we turn the feather over so that it sits on the paper more like a bridge. I sense a disapproving glance from a participant across the circle, as if I have crossed a line of protocol. Since there are no protests, the chairperson agrees to go along and turns the feather over. The light reflects differently this time and the shape of the shadow changes as well. Over an hour has passed since the beginning of our session and still I am intrigued with this feather. This time I chose a felt tip pen to make a contour drawing, tracing the edge and noticing
the relationship between the feather and its shadow. It takes several attempts before I am satisfied that I have caught the curve of the shaft, the gesture of the over-turned feather. I notice that contour drawing doesn’t satisfactorily convey for me the delicate way in which each barb tapers to form the edge. There is no such distinct line in nature. Then I think, “It would not have fallen naturally in that position.” And I remember the way that feathers, like certain leaves, gently rock back and forth as they float to the ground, landing on their curved backs.

**Discussion**

My thought is interrupted as Sybil, a long time participant, and a college professor, initiates our discussion. Jenny notices that as she “kept looking at the feather, it would keep changing, and I would see things that weren’t there before. Then I had to keep refreshing my lines, and rearranging my drawing.” Adrienne says she thought about “how difficult it is to separate what we know and what we see.” She continues, “I thought about how limiting line is in some ways because in some ways you can see the edge of something as a line between, but there really isn’t a line around the edge of the feather. Instead it’s more like two tones coming together in terms of light and dark.” Carris says, “When we drew the backside of the feather after we described it, I was thinking more about how the feather went together, my drawing had a tendency to move out from the quill, the way the feather itself was arranged.” Sybil says that after our oral description, which she considered a collective look, she put “new emphasis on certain things like on the curvature of the whole. I was much more attentive to light.”

Judy, who initially spoke of her discomfort with this exercise, tells us that “This feather leaves me with an incredible sense of wonder about birds, and feathers, and how
individual feathers work with groups of feathers to allow a bird to fly.” Kate adds, “It seems that questions just naturally keep percolating up as we looked more at the feather. Those interesting questions are a natural form of inquiry, and open up all kinds of entry points for thinking. I would like to hear everyone’s questions and write them down. I bet we could fill a whole chalkboard.”

Jenny says “I was thinking about perspective, and about the importance of looking from many different angles. The mutability of things.” She was “able to get, in Toni Morrison’s words, ‘the bones down,’ and then go back and I could play. So on one level I felt that I needed to grasp the whole. If only I could have this sense of the whole and grasp it, and then fill in the details, then I would have it right. Then I understood the impossibility of that as a task. What we’re looking at is changing even as we look. And so is the child. It’s worth bearing that in mind.” Adrienne was intent on determining what was essential about the feather, and “capturing the delicacy of it.” Her rendering is the most impressionistic of the group, moving more towards interpretive description. “I found I was consciously thinking about the kind of delicacy that it had, and I was thinking that to draw delicacy was not that close to representation. It doesn’t have to be extremely representational to capture the delicacy.” Carris tells of her growing feeling of reverence for the feather saying that, for the Greeks, “capturing a likeness became a form of worship.” Kate goes back to description as a process, “What comes out of this session, and I’m thinking back to Whitehead’s terms of feeling and experience, is the sense of wonder and care-taking that comes from describing this matter-of-fact, everyday feather. By staying with it, noticing all the particularity about that feather, we see that it also holds the generality of ‘featherness.’ ”

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Chairperson’s Summary

Sybil begins her summary by saying that the combination of visual and oral
description allows us to go more in depth. It seemed that the longer we looked, the more
affection we felt for this particular feather. She realizes that it is difficult to separate
what we see and what we know, yet this process allowed us to know in a different way.
She went on to say that where we begin with an inquiry makes a difference in the
direction and in the outcome. “The perspective from which we were seeing it made a
difference, where we sat, when we flipped it over, and when we took it into our hand.”
She rephrases the questions which arose for us: When does description cross over into
inquiry, and inquiry into interpretation? Going back to our earlier work around knowing,
and knowledge, where does the general knowledge of feathers keep us from really seeing
this particular feather? What is the purpose of taking a descriptive stance? How does
this description of the feather relate to how we describe children?

Whitehead and the Gesture of a Feather

In *Modes of Thought*, Whitehead notes that our major modes of perception are
grounded in the senses. Through our sense of sight we apprehend more of the object and
less of ourselves, because fewer bodily referents are brought into play, yet a background
of bodily feeling remains present. When the group’s descriptions moved to inquiry, its
conceptual experience shifted so that “a sense of what might be” joins with “a sense of
what might have been” (Whitehead, p. 37). When we picked up and closely examined
the feather many of us began to wonder about its origins, development and the
relationship of its form to its function. The intensity and vividness of the sustained focus
on that particular feather made it more “important,” in the sense that Whitehead uses that
word, evoking, for some of us a sense of reverence. Our feelings for the feather were expressed as gestures which, in this case, resulted in a drawing, but could just as well have been a dance.

According to Whitehead, the feather itself can be perceived as “a region of expression (Whitehead, p. 31). “In every grade of social aggregation, from a nonliving material society up to a human body, there is the necessity for expression” (p. 39). I remember Danielle’s quote that Sunday morning as we prepared for this assignment, “A tree sticks to its business of mere survival and so does an oyster with some minor divergencies” as does a feather (p. 43). Unlike the feather, however, our human aim is “survival for diversified worthwhile experiences.”

Through shared oral inquiry we experience the “connexity of existence,” which Whitehead sees as the “essence of understanding” (p. 46). We converse with others and with ourselves to articulate both memory and our imaginative experiences. These dialogues facilitate the constitution of ideas. Changes in the way we perceived the feather, shaped by our talking, were evident in many of our second drawings. For example, during the oral description Sybil heard something that drew her attention to the curvature of the whole and to the reflections on its surface.

**Evaluation of the Process**

As part of the descriptive process, our session ends with an evaluation and critique. One participant feels that when I playfully waved the feather in the air as I passed it to the next person, I had intervened in a manner that was “experimental,” as if I had picked it up and dropped it. She equates this gesture with an hasty interpretive remark during a descriptive review of a child, and reiterates the importance of taking a
respectful stance. She also admits that since she came to this session fresh from teaching the Institute on Descriptive Processes for newcomers, she is probably being overly strict about following the descriptive process we are using today. “The feather is packed with ideas about structure and purpose, so if we held a leaf up and moved it through the air the way the feather was moved, it’s kind of moving into stuff we know... what you know about a kid could cloud what you see about them.” In turn, I acknowledge my impulsivity.

We are all in agreement that pairing drawing and oral description enhanced both activities. The additional focus on gesture, in Whitehead’s sense of “expression,” helped us to consider the “latent function contained within its structural components,” and to strive to capture the dynamic curve of the resting feather. For example the structural components of an unattached goose feather create buoyancy: it floats on water and, when dropped, it floats through the air. It is strong but light, tapered and curved, grooved and convex. I recall artists’ notebooks, like those of Paul Klee or Leonardo Da Vinci in which text and drawings intertwine. Karen Ernst (1994), a writer and artist, in Picturing Learning, describes artist notebooks with teachers and children in her school to pair words and images as they observe a still life, for example, or do figure drawing. She notes that as students drew they saw more. In addition, as they wrote down their observations and questions, new investigations for drawing and writing opened up.

Summary

I recall how, at the beginning of the session, I was dismayed by the group’s choice of “a nondescript goose feather.” However, our collaborative looking and talking caused each of us to refine our initial impressions while raising questions about feathers
we would probably never have asked on our own. This particular feather is now inscribed in my memory. It has also become an emblem for me of times we have explored, as much as is possible, the process of our thinking as we engage in descriptive inquiry. Attending to the nature of the process of description itself began in 1987 as we described Iris’s portrait of a young woman. As we did a Review of a Work we were asked to note what we were thinking as we went along, what we attended to when others commented, where our was attention was drawn, how we decided what to contribute when it was our turn, and so on. In other words, what does happen when description becomes inquiry? Examining the process of description itself continued in various permutations over several summers, for example the recent form of alternating oral description and drawing.

The rigor of this systematic investigation was shaped by an agreed upon structure: temporarily setting aside our previous knowledge of feathers as much as possible; not touching the feather, just looking; deliberately refraining from using metaphors until near the end of the session; and grounding our description in the object itself. Through her summaries, the chairperson clustered and linked our comments, then posed questions to widen the inquiry. She encouraged us to pull back and think of the larger implications of gesture, our own, as well as the gesture of that particular feather. Our perceptions and understanding of the gesture of that particular feather were made visible to others through the gesture of drawing. Using drawing as a way to describe raised questions about the nature of the feather and the relationship of form to possible function. What we came to know about the feather grew as we orally described it and this contributed to our own understanding of its gesture. At the end we were left with emerging unanswered
questions about the physiology and aerodynamic qualities of this feather, and feathers in general. But there were other outcomes as well: participants experienced a connectedness, a recognition, some even a reverence, for what is ordinarily perceived as a mundane object—a goose feather on the beach.

Sybil requested us to consider, “What is the purpose of taking a descriptive stance?” The question pertains to children when we present a Review of a Child, or a Review of a Child’s Work. As Patricia Carini (Summer 1999) reminds us, a full, careful description is a strong reminder to “set complexity against correctness, and the fullness of the child’s capacity against the narrow lenses of tests, of ranking and sorting” (p. 21).
CHAPTER FIVE

MATH INVESTIGATIONS:
AN AFTERNOON SESSION OF TEACHER RESEARCH

This chapter is multi-layered--working from the outside to the inside, I portray the collaborative efforts of a small group as they describe and discuss a paper that one of them has written about mathematics investigations in her classroom. Mid-way through the session they go on to an additional description of a sample of work from one of the children depicted in the paper. The session ends with a return to the paper, followed by a discussion about the mathematics instruction in general and the difficulty of portraying children as they work on math activities. Further recommendations are offered and questions are posed. My interest in portraying this group was to capture the spirit and experience of their exchanges during their collaboration.

Background

While there are no grades in this non-affiliated study group, there are certain expectations and responsibilities, one of which is attending the major seminar in the morning. When the Institute was run by Patricia Carini, some participants received credit towards their masters degrees, while the tuition of others was partially funded by a Jesse Smith Noyes Foundation grant. Participants were expected to attend all sessions. After the Institute was reconstellated as a collaborative study group in 1987, the tradition continued of partitioning the day into a major seminar in the morning and two sessions in the afternoon.
The Institute works best if each participant sets aside the time to support others in their personal investigations. Their support takes the form of volunteering to chair, offering to take notes, helping with a presentation, discussing a topic, or giving feedback about a manuscript. Although attendance for the afternoon and evening sessions is considered voluntary, achieving a personal balance between working on one’s own research project while continuing to support the work of others by attending their sessions entails making difficult choices. Some individuals choose to postpone work on their own projects until after the evening sessions, often writing late into the night. Others get up and start working at five in the morning, settling for coffee in their rooms rather than breakfast in the dining hall.

There are a variety of reasons that people choose to attend a session. For example, if two participants have a shared research interest, both benefit if one chairs or takes a full set of notes for the other. People may be interested in a particular topic, such as looking at the implication of high stakes testing through a description of the writing of an adolescent thought to be at risk. Others will attend a session simply because a friend is presenting and they enjoy working together. If scheduling conflicts arise and not enough people have signed up for a particular session, then it will be canceled. However, a presenter can usually find other ways of getting the support she needs, most likely from someone in the Institute who shares her interest. The residential nature of the Institute facilitates formal, as well as informal, collaboration, and follow-up questions from a session can be asked.

It is not an easy task to structure the afternoon and evening sessions collaboratively so that everyone is assured a place on the schedule. On the first day of
the Institute, three or four people who enjoy the challenge of planning a schedule form the committee. They solicit suggestions and requests for sessions and begin the negotiations to fill the time slots. Generally, they plan for a week at a time so that they can adjust times and dates as necessary. The schedule is then posted in the main meeting room along with a daily sign-up list.

The afternoon sessions represent a variety of topics. The framing questions for presentations or discussions generally relate to student work, teaching practice, curriculum, or issues. The sessions are mostly structured by the various review processes and draw on classroom materials such as the work of one child, a collection of work samples relating to a curriculum topic, a teacher’s journal, a video, or parent newsletters. Close Reading is the preferred process when a participant has written a paper or an article and has a focusing question.

**Choosing a Topic**

For the past few years, Danielle shared an interest with a number of other participants in finding ways to describe adequately children’s mathematical thinking. When she served as her grade level’s math curriculum coordinator, Danielle took a district course, co-taught by Catherine Fosnot, called Math in the City. She appreciated the constructivist approach of the course and wrote a response paper about expectations for third graders in math. When she returned in the fall, Danielle intended to share this paper with her colleagues. In the meantime, she had brought it with her to the Institute because she was interested in shaping it into an article. By signing up for an afternoon session, she hoped to get helpful feedback about her work.
After she confirmed that she had been scheduled for a Descriptive Review of her paper, Danielle recruited her former student teacher, Marta, to be her chairperson. Next, she contacted the people who had signed up in advance of the session and gave them copies of her paper, asking them to keep these questions in mind as they read: “Did the paper adequately present how she supported children in the development of their mathematical thinking? Were there any recommendations? In what ways might the paper be helpful for her colleagues and perhaps a larger audience?”

Five of us had signed up for her Review—enough varied perspectives to have an interesting conversation. All of us had known Danielle for a number of years. Everyone present, except for Melissa, had visited Danielle’s second/third grade classroom and were familiar with her teaching style. All of us knew of her strong commitment to working closely with the families of her urban, public school.

Round One: First Impressions

The session was scheduled for the Monday of the second week, and it was an extremely hot afternoon. To keep cool, we chose to meet in a ground-floor alcove at the base of the dormitory stairs. One person sat on the stairs, Danielle and Irene shared the small couch, and Marta and I sat in wicker chairs facing into the circle. Two short hallways led off to either side, and behind us was a small kitchen. A concrete block propped open the metal outside door so we could get a small breeze.

Marta began the session by asking us to take a few minutes to skim the paper in order to review those sections which interested us. As we sat together reading quietly, we could hear the sound of a distant radio over the rustle of our turning pages. I don’t know who was more startled: our group, or the Building and Grounds man when he burst
through the door in order to empty the kitchen trash containers into the waiting truck, which had suddenly pulled up on the gravel driveway outside our door.

As the dust and clatter subsided, Marta suggested that we begin the Review by going around the circle to give our first impressions of the paper. She started us off by reading the topic sentence from one of the beginning paragraphs of the article: “One means of coming to understanding, one means of trying one’s thinking out, is to share in community.” Marta, as a former student teacher of Danielle’s, related how reading the paper brought back memories of the learning community she experienced as she worked in the classroom, adding “The math looked different then.”

We continued around the circle, each person commenting on something that interested them about the paper. Kate liked the way Danielle structured the section outlining third grade skills, including models, strategies, big ideas, and properties. Melissa, who was a principal, said she appreciated the way in which Danielle had cited the sources for her theoretical stance and then followed up with examples of students talking with one another as they worked on problems.

At one point, before Marta could intervene as chair, Danielle interjected that one purpose of her paper was to address the assumption made by several teachers in her course that it was possible to assess students primarily by looking at their papers. Evidently, the district’s new math program required that students show their work, as well as write out an explanation of their thinking process. While Danielle knew many third graders struggled with writing about their thinking, she also felt that their writing didn’t give teachers enough information, “You might be able to tell some of the thinking, but you might not find how the kid got there.” In her paper, Danielle gave examples of
how she used observation and conversing with students while they worked on activities to document what they understood about math. She believes that, "Probing another's thinking process is an intimate process and one should not make assumptions."

Danielle works to build good relationships with her students and their families. The examples in her paper help readers to see that when the children in her room felt cared for, they became more comfortable taking risks and making mistakes. One child she wrote about had a particularly difficult time with math because he was often absent, but working in partners allowed other children to model ways of talking about math or finding alternative approaches to solving a problem.

Throughout her paper, Danielle sought to position the intimacy of working with individual children within the larger conversation of school change: "Although mathematics is the occasion for this investigation, my central piece is a way of learning and teaching, a way of being in the world as a reflective participant." Danielle and Irene, who was also a participant of this afternoon's session, were being trained to use the math program that their district had recently adopted. Like several other programs, it stressed a problem solving approach using open-ended questions. However, Irene felt that Danielle’s approach exemplified "more organic math instruction" because she regularly incorporated the interests and suggestions of the children while working to find ways of bringing math into other subject areas.

In contrast to Danielle’s approach, Irene told us about a conversation that she had with one colleague who implied that: "You had better do this particular activity in kindergarten because I’m counting on building on that in first grade." Irene felt that many teachers simply followed the lesson plans as they were written up in the teacher’s
guides, whereas Danielle's paper showed how the same concepts could be more broadly applied as a scaffolding for planning a variety of activities in which children could explore a concept. Kate felt Danielle should eliminate the name of the new math program in her paper, suggesting that her narratives about the children had integrity and value in themselves. Melissa agreed with Kate, adding that the name of the program might distract the reader from the points that Danielle wanted to make and could possibly limit her audience.

Marta ended that portion of the Descriptive Review by reminding us that we were beginning to give recommendations instead of just giving our first impressions. After her brief summary, she encouraged us to decide how to structure our descriptive process in a way that would be most helpful to Danielle. Danielle had brought along some work samples of Hannah, a pseudonym, which she had used to illustrate one section of her paper. She asked if we could look at these as well. Although we were curious about the work, we knew that a full description of Hannah's math would dilute our focus on the paper, which was ostensibly the focus of the sessions. Kate posited that looking at Hannah's work might give us a sense of how math is integrated throughout the day. Meanwhile, as we were talking, Danielle had gone ahead and selected three pieces of paper from a large folder of Hannah's work and had quietly put them on the floor in the middle of our small circle.

Finally, the chair took the prerogative of deciding how to proceed. She thought that it might be possible to integrate the description of Hannah's math papers with a description of the short section in the paper depicting Hannah at work. Marta suggested two focusing questions: "Was the section clearly written? Did it convey what we see
Round Two: Describing Danielle’s Paper

Danielle began by telling us a little about the section we were about to describe. Danielle had been out of her classroom for a day, and when she returned she noticed a pile of haiku poems on her desk, left by the substitute teacher. As part of their interest in integrating the content areas, Danielle and her student teacher decided to create a math lesson using the number of syllables in the poems to determine how many haiku could be written in twenty-one lines and how many syllables would be spoken if they were read aloud.

After several rounds of literal description, Melissa remarked on the affinity between math and poetry. “In poetry you’re dealing with image, rhythm, pattern and form, and it’s that pattern, form and rhythmicity that allow you to take it into math language and merge those two, in order to think more deeply about both of them.” Marta then reminded us that we were still in a more descriptive rather than interpretive phase of the process, and to wait until we finished this round.

Marta briefly summarized what we had said up to this point. Danielle’s approach was to make math inviting and, at times, playful as she recognized and incorporated children’s suggestions. In her paper, she described how the children worked in partners on the haiku, counting syllables and lines, an activity that appealed to the children, including those who were still emergent readers. Danielle wanted all the children to experience the range of possibilities for mathematical thinking. In one section of her
paper, she wrote about the whole class math discussion during which children were expected to talk about how they figured something out while their classmates listened and asked clarifying questions. Her intent was to encourage the children to make new connections as well as to support their consolidation of a new concept.

We continued going around the circle and speaking in turn; however, Danielle was especially excited by the comments people made and continually wanted to interrupt to reply. Marta, recognizing her excitement, encouraged her with humor and patience to wait until it was her turn before commenting. The slow pace of a Review is deliberate, so that participants have time to consider what others have added before they make their own contribution. When someone interrupts the group’s train of thought, it is distracting. The chair is responsible for maintaining the respectful nature of the process by minimizing disruptions.

People have time to reconsider and, based on the emerging evidence, revise an earlier statement. For example, as we gave our first impressions at the beginning of the session, Melissa told Danielle that she thought it was important to include the wrong turns children might have taken as they explored how to get the answer: “That way we don’t make assumptions about what they were thinking.” Later, during the description of the paper, she revised her earlier statement: “In here is a very clear illustration of a path, and a turn in that path, with Hannah’s thinking. There’s a real representation about how she self-corrects in her own work.” Since the focus of our Review was Danielle’s paper rather than the quality of each person’s contribution, participants didn’t hesitate to offer a different point of view or self-correct an earlier statement. As the layers of the description began to build, the chair had the difficult task of what Prospect members refer
to as, "holding the thought for the group." She did this by taking notes, listening for the main points, taking them out of chronological order, and clustering ideas and phrases under headings as they came up. Because this is an oral process, her summaries helped to integrate our statements into a more coherent evolving whole, while keeping the focus on the initial question. The shorter, periodic summaries kept the conversation moving forward.

The initial Reflection on the Keyword, "real" that took place on the first day of the Institute, provided a larger context for our afternoon session. As participants developed a heightened awareness of how frequently the word "real" occurred in ordinary usage, they began to look for it and apply it consciously. For example, at one point in the Review, Melissa used "real," in the sense of being authentic, a believable example of a child at work. Kate said that Danielle's paper presented "a real description of how math is everywhere," making reference to a publisher's well-known math slogan: "Math is everywhere," in a program that was primarily worksheet rather than activity based. Danielle was interested in a "real" or authentic depiction of children working in meaningful activities. In one section of her paper she described children informally estimating and counting items on their own that they had brought from home for special projects as an example of a "real" math activity.

When our description of her paper ended, time was set aside for Danielle to tell us what she had found particularly exciting and interesting about our comments as they related to her work. She now thought that she might restructure her paper by moving the example of Hannah closer to the beginning. Our comments had helped her see that she could include more examples of how she had learned from the children, particularly as
she sat writing haiku with them. While Danielle was appreciative of our encouragement to keep revising, she also let us know that: "This is not a draft!"

It takes confidence and trust to put one's work into the middle of the circle for such close description. As an experienced participant, Danielle knew that the primary focus would be around the questions that she initially raised, and that if there were suggestions, that the intention would be to support her desire to bring her paper to a wider audience. She also knew that she could ask anyone at the Institute to read her paper, and that they would read it and give her additional feedback.

Next, we moved on to look more closely at Hannah's math work. Earlier in our process, Danielle had placed several large sheets of manila construction paper covered with calculations in pink magic marker into the middle of our circle. Through our collaborative description, we hoped to be able to trace the path of Hannah's thinking as she came to a solution of haiku syllables, as well as catch a glimpse of the person behind the work.

**Round Three: Description of Hannah's Work**

Danielle passed out a sheet containing seven haiku poems written by children in her class. To help us begin our description, Marta repeated Danielle's math assignment for the children: "Using this paper, determine how many haiku could be written in twenty-one lines, and how many syllables would be spoken if they were read aloud."

Reading through them we noticed that, although all the poems had three lines, some did not have the traditional five/seven/five syllable format. The large size of Hannah's posters, 18” X 24”, made it easy for all of us to see her work. During our description we
picked up her work so that we could examine it more closely, passing it from one to the
next as we described it.

Hannah had used pink marker for her calculations on the manila paper, which
struck some of us as an unusual color for doing math. Since the marker could not be
erased and nothing was crossed out, there was a sense of confidence in her work. On
Hannah's copy of the class haiku sheet, we could see that she had carefully drawn a small
heart in pencil to the right of each poem, and that she had done her calculations next to
the hearts. We learned from Danielle that Hannah often drew hearts on her math papers,
and we wondered if it was a sign that she felt affection for her classmates and enjoyed the
math activity, as well. The size of the paper that Hannah had chosen, along with the
clearly laid out calculations in large, neat numbers gave us the impression that Hannah
was intending to present her work to the class during the "Math Congress"—a class
meeting where children would talk about their math work. Melissa saw Hannah “already
in sort of a teaching mode in the work, telling people what she has—about what she’s
done.”

In the following transcription, I have deviated from standard form using digits in
order to make it easier for the reader to follow Hannah’s calculations. All the haiku had
seventeen syllables, but as Melissa noted: “She found two haiku that had more than 17
syllables—20. This is someone who must be very careful and very deliberate.” We
continued our description in order to trace how Hannah had arrived at her solution. “She
took 3 from each of the two haiku that had 20 syllables. Then, using her knowledge
about square numbers, she grouped the 7’s in the seven 18’s to get 49.” “She multiplied
the 10’s by seven to get 70, and added in the left-over 6 syllables at the end to make 125
total syllables.” People continued to make observations until Marta stopped to summarize. Through our earlier reading of Danielle’s paper, we had a glimpse of Hannah at work. Seeing the work itself, we had other evidence of her thinking in her choice of color, the sure, careful, formation of her numbers, the hearts, and the clear steps in her calculations.

Round Four: Discussion

Now that the group was more familiar with Danielle’s paper and had looked carefully at Hannah’s work, people began to make new connections between the two. In this respect, we strayed a bit from the formal processes. In fact, we had already strayed in taking on two different things in one session. Ideally, we would have met for two sessions. During the first session, we might have chosen several sections of Danielle’s paper for a line-by-line reading, keeping the focusing question in mind. In the second session, the chair and Danielle would have pre-selected one or two pieces from Hannah’s math work, and perhaps chosen a word for a Reflection. After a brief Reflection on the Word, the group would have gone on to do a Descriptive Review of Hannah’s work.

Traditionally, each participant is allotted only one session because the Institute has fewer than ten days to schedule one afternoon and an evening session. Two sessions for Danielle would not have been possible this summer. Instead, both processes were necessarily abbreviated in order to help her think about how she might revise the paper. Collaboratively looking at Hannah’s work gave her some distance on her work, as well as the opportunity to confirm what she had written. During the discussion that followed, Danielle wondered aloud if she should expand the section that we had described in detail where she wrote about how children learn from one another as they collaborate. For
example, she wanted to include our observation of how Hannah, in her “teaching mode,” had written down a variety of ways to solve the problem, perhaps in the anticipation that some of her classmates would be more comfortable using a different strategy.

We agreed with Danielle that expanding the section, particularly the part about whole group math discussion, would be helpful to the reader. Irene made two points to support this. The first had to do with making the collaborative nature of Danielle’s classroom clearer and showing how her constructivist approach supported the children’s mathematical development: "I keep coming back to the work share, because it makes the thinking visible, the thinking can be explored rather than Hannah’s correct answer.” In order to make her second point, she read aloud from a section of Danielle’s paper: “How do you make the quality of engagement visible?” Isabel wanted to see even more specific examples of how the children were engaging with the mathematical work.

Next, Marta asked us to consider how Danielle’s paper might be useful for its intended audience. Many elementary teachers think of math instruction as planning a series of activities for a specific time each day, whereas, Danielle’s paper depicted more of what she refers to as a “process approach.” She was interested in how mathematical investigations occurred naturally throughout the day, not just during specifically designated times. The group felt that her examples showed how mathematical thinking arose out of the children’s ongoing work in the classroom, but wished that she could be more explicit about the implications for learning mathematics in that manner.

As we neared the end of our discussion, Irene read aloud from the paper: “One means of coming to understanding, one means of trying one’s thinking out is to share in community.” She laughed and then said, “That’s what we were just doing, sitting in this
small circle!” Since the session was longer than usual and because of the intense heat, Marta did not do a final summary. Instead she thanked us for our participation as she helped Danielle gather up her papers. The rest of us emerged from the cool dormitory stairwell into the late afternoon heat.

**Follow-up Conversation**

After reading through a transcription of our session, Danielle and I met for a follow-up conversation. She acknowledged, “of course I teach skills, it comes along with the terrain.” But what really interested her was how children interact with one another and “how they make meaning.” She also stressed that the whole idea of modeling, of using the math course or her examples in the paper as a model, “is insane... You can use these as a scaffold—something to hold on to if you're not sure-footed.”

Danielle was approached to have her haiku section be part of a book that Catherine Fosnot was writing, but she declined. The interest that her instructor showed in the piece spurred her to edit it for possible publication elsewhere. In talking about how she might organize her paper, Danielle drew on our manner of working at the Institute. She thought that she would begin with an illustration of children working on math activities in her room, followed by a more philosophical section about her educational stance, “like doing the back and forth of reading Whitehead together and having a child study in front of you, or reading Berlin and talking about a teacher’s work.”

Authors from our readings, past and present, are frequently referenced by Danielle when she is at summer Institute. She especially enjoys reading philosophy and poetry. She returned to Irene’s question of how one captures the quality of a child’s engagement, saying that she wanted to portray that quality in the way that Whitehead...
speaks of engagement, “where there is harmony, intensity and vividness.” For example, when teachers plan math activities which move from one to the next “in order to keep somebody else’s schedule they miss the quality of engagement.” Danielle thinks of rubrics are a form of check-list, and that their use “doesn’t talk about the joyfulness of things.” Danielle comes to the Institute because she feels using descriptive processes “gets at those qualities of a child’s work that may be immeasurable, but are no less important.”

We talked about how her thirty-year connection with Prospect Center has influenced her teaching practice as well as her work with others in her school. “I think one of the foundational pieces of our work here is having a conversation, and part of having a conversation is having a conversation among equals—which means there is no ranking. . . That takes seeing that somehow the circle is important,” meaning that people “have to be able to see beyond their own needs.” Danielle returns to Summer Institute each year and finds it sustains her engagement with teaching. She also retains her connections with other teacher networks as well, such as the North Dakota Study Group and the Workshop Center at City College.

**Summary**

By voluntarily setting aside our time to read Danielle’s paper and to attend her session, we demonstrated that we understood that this work was meaningful to her, and we supported her inquiry. As Marta chaired, she did not follow the review process as doctrine, and instead took advantage of the small size of the group to listen to our concerns and interests. As a result the inquiry maintained a focus and progressed in directions that were most helpful for Danielle. Despite the fact that there were only five
of us, the formality of our collaborative description ensured that we were respectful of Danielle, of her work, and of Hannah and her work.

The session was beneficial for Danielle, and for the rest of us as well. Our in-depth description of one section of her paper, followed by our questions, helped Danielle to see what was already there, as well as what might need to be expanded. New possibilities arose for her next draft, such as additional ways of depicting the quality of the children’s engagement. Looking at Hannah’s papers, we were able to see for ourselves how Hannah approached a task, her intention to communicate what she discovered, and the pleasure she experienced in the process. Reflecting on Hannah’s work and reading about the other children described in Danielle’s paper was a reminder to all of us of the importance of keeping a space in classrooms for children to explore ideas on their own and at their own pace. For those who had not yet ventured to write about their own classrooms, going through this process with Danielle could be an example of starting places.

Since our talk, I have read two more revisions of Danielle’s paper. Our ongoing conversation, like those of many other participants in the Institute, is sustained throughout the year by e-mail, telephone calls, and conversations during the November Conference. As I read the latest version, it seemed to me that a passage that she wrote about the importance of small group work in her classroom also speaks to how she envisions her relationships with other educators:
Working in two's and three's allows an intimacy in shared thinking. When the child puts forth her work to the class community... she is able to see her understanding, and perhaps her non-understanding reflected in her work. She is able to see her own approach in another's work. She may, if it makes sense to her, take on another's thought expressed through their work and explanation--try it out and make it her own; or question where it doesn't make sense... thereby developing firmer ground for her own thinking.
CHAPTER SIX

KEYWORD, "TRANSITION"

“A word is a microcosm of human consciousness.”
Vygotsky (1962, p. 153)

**Influences on Language Use**

Since Prospect Center’s descriptive processes are primarily oral, their successful application depends upon the thoughtful use of descriptive language that is precise and free of educational jargon. Common readings over the span of Summer Institutes have shaped how participants think about the language of description and interpretation. Readings from Owen Barfield to Raymond Williams have been included in the Summer Institute bibliography since the 1970’s. Two readings, in particular, have been influential in the development and use of the reflective processes, *Keywords* (1967), by Williams and *Speaker’s Meaning* (1967) by Barfield.

In *Keywords*, Williams examines what he refers to as the historical semantics of words, their “origins and developments, along with present meanings, implications and relationships” (p. 23). While he notes that words can be regarded as “simple units with inherent proper or strict meanings as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary,*” Williams prefers to characterize dictionaries as “primarily philological and etymological.” He believes they are best suited for depicting range and variation, while cautioning that they embody the “ideology of their editors" (Ibid.).
Williams is more interested in “the complex and variable sense of particular words, how networks of usage, reference and perspective are developed . . . to make possible the sense of an extended and intricate vocabulary, within which both the variable words and their varied and variable interrelations are, in practice, active” (Ibid.).

Prospect Center's process, Reflection on a Keyword, highlights and brings forward the “networks of usage, reference and perspective” of ordinary words, and prepares the ground for a thoughtful conversation.

In Speaker's Meaning Barfield addresses the notions of lexical and conversational meaning. His premise is that language has two primary functions, communication and expression. He sees the relationship between these two usages as dynamic, resulting in the contraction and expansion of the meanings of a specific word over time. Barfield speaks of “looking through one sense of a word to another, and . . . what is most characteristic of figurative language as a whole is precisely this translucence” (p. 49).

During collaborative descriptions of children's works, participants have found that an elusive quality in a painting can often be better grasped through the use of figurative language, such as metaphor. Taking the time to slow down in order to find words that best communicate what the painter has expressed can expand how a work is perceived. A Reflection on a Keyword is often used to provide a focus for an extended session in which participants explore an artistic medium, an issue, a keyword, or an idea. This process was used quite often in Institute I for newcomers, for example in beginning descriptions of Sean's work. According to their handbook, the intent is to “explore and disclose from the perspectives of a group of participants the range of meanings, images and experiences embodied in a word.”
Using this process can open up a discussion as well as provide a focus for deepening a description that might follow. For example while preparing to chair a session to look at a child’s painting, a person might select a prominent surface feature for a word, something like “sun.” In longer spanning child studies, such as Sean’s, where the same motif arises in a number of works, choosing a word like “eye,” for a reflection can provide common ground for beginning a review. In past Institutes, participants have selected words such as “know,” “authority,” or “community,” for Reflections preceding a Review of an Issue or a Reviews of Practice. The following vignette from 1998, depicts an evening session during the Summer Institute using this process to reflect on the word, “transition.”

**A Reflection on a Keyword, “Transition”**

An unusual number of the participants during the summer of 1998 were experiencing changes in their work situations, while others were concerned with changes in their personal lives. Brian, who was chairing this session, had recently gone through a major school reorganization. After several conversations with people, he decided to sign up for an evening session using A Reflection on a Keyword, “transition.” Brian volunteered to chair, and posted a sign-up sheet. Nine people had signed up in advance, and some of us who arrived early helped to move the furniture from the large afternoon session into a tighter circle in anticipation of a small group. As the meeting time approached, more and more people continued to arrive so that when it was time to begin, the furniture had to be rearranged to accommodate twenty participants.

Evening sessions begin around 7:00 and are typically held in the living rooms of the dormitories. This particular room had a wall of windows which faced the Green of
Bennington College. Since it was a warm night, the windows were raised and we could hear the distant sound of a string quartet from the chamber music group rehearsing in their living room on the other side of the Green. The sun was beginning to set, and we had not yet turned on the sconces that illuminated the walls.

People were quiet and tired as they came into the semi-darkness. They had already attended the four-hour morning session and perhaps an afternoon session as well. Before going to sleep that night, most of us would return to our rooms to work on assigned readings and prepare for the next day's sessions. Late arrivals who couldn't squeeze into the three couches, sat on chairs or on the floor, leaning back against the couches.

Each person attended that session because of a keen interest in "transition." From conversations during meals and walks, I was already aware that "transition" meant involuntary transfer to a new building, the unexpected termination of a contract, the closing of school, a change in administration, a divorce, and the death of a family member. Brian had most likely written out his own Reflection on "transition," in preparation for the session. If the chairperson has clustered his own ideas under possible headings, then when participants speak during the session, their examples will fill out the tentative headings. There are always surprises and unexpected clusters during a session. For many people that is what makes chairing an engaging and satisfying. Not everyone enjoys taking on the role. It takes practice to simultaneously listen, think about how to cluster the phrases and ideas, and quickly write them down. At the end of a long day, when both the chair and the participants are tired, advance preparation for an evening session is especially necessary.
As chair, Brian outlined the familiar procedure, "Think about and write down your understanding of the word, 'transition'—not to define it, but to think about the contexts in which it might appear. Think about your related experiences--its connotations, and the ideas and images it might evoke." As we wrote in our journals or notebooks, Brian was also writing, glancing up periodically to see how many people were still writing and how many were waiting to begin the Reflection.

After about eight minutes, Brian asked for a volunteer who would be willing to start. People put down their pens and the session began. Someone got up to turn on the lights, while another closed the windows to keep out the mosquitoes. Anna told us about the image that came to her of hopping from one stone to another across a brook, looking behind for possible danger, and turning to check the next stone in order to keep moving. Ronny spoke of transplanting flowers and how delicate that can sometimes be--too much sun, not enough water, not the right soil conditions--will they make it? Another said tennis is all about transition: stopping and starting. Claire, whose mother had died in the spring talked about the importance of rituals in easing transitions.

Each person spoke without interruption for a few minutes reading what they had written or speaking from their notes. As Brian began his summary to an attentive, but tired, group, the sky had darkened completely.

Chair's Summary of "Transition"

Transition involves movement, "transit," and is a passage from one form, state, style, or place to another. It can also be from known to unknown, or known to known. Transition itself can be a neutral zone: not this, not that, limbo. In transition we cross boundaries which may be permeable or not, fluid or rigid. The elapsed time for a transition may be quick, delayed, or seemingly eternal. Some transitions are cyclical, as in the seasons or night into day. In discourse there are transitions from one subject to another, one
genre to another. In music, modulation denotes transitions or a passage may connect two themes or movements.

Our response to transition varies. From an Eastern point of view, everything changes—that is the norm. In that sense we live with uncertainty, surrendering to the unknown. Maturation is a form of transition through the life span: infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age, and death. Transition often brings change and our anticipation can be exhilarating or worrisome. Afterwards, we may need time to recover from an especially emotional transition before re-engaging. Present loss can resonate with past losses. Rituals can provide a supportive structure or mark transitions in relationships: acquaintance to friendship, marriage to divorce, birth to death. Patience differs from endurance in how we respond to transition. Locations associated with transition were mentioned: passageways, tunnels, bridges, borders, rivers, oceans, continents. Boundaries may also be levels or layers: above/below, air/water, mountain-valley, inside/outside, dreaming/awake, and life/death. Children associate schooling with seasons, and we speak of transitioning from summer vacations. Depending on where you put the focus, the view of transition changes: from day-to-day, to life cycles, to the cycles in the solar system, and on out into the universe.

Sometimes we are transformed by transitions—metamorphosis. During a transition, we may be the one left behind, while another may retain the guilt of having left. When transplanting flowers thinking, “Will they make it?” “What can I do to insure they do?” In the context of taking action and developing a sense of agency, someone said: “Who is in control? If you aren’t, who is responsible? How do you handle it?” It helps to have something you can hold on to while you go through a transition—literally, crutches or railings, mentally—friends, relatives, and prayer. In the larger sense of things, transition is part of life, “You do what you have to do.” Someone quoted Maxine Greene, “I am who I am not yet.”

After the session there seemed to be a shift, almost like a collective sigh, that was visible in the affect of people’s bodies. There were smiles, conversation, and laughter as people left to head back to their rooms. As Patricia Carini writes: “For the individual participant, the process prompts further thought, breaks the crust of hardened habits of mind, revitalizes the vocabulary and, in short ‘washes the doors of perception clean,’ making possible more refined and nuanced observations—whether of an activity, person or art work” (Working Documents from Prospect Center. 1986, p.2).
At the beginning of the session, individual understanding was storied and personal. Listening to comments of others, participants were able to hear the broader implications of "transition" and experience what Williams refers to as "the complex and variable sense" of that particular word. Through the collaborative process of A Reflection on a Key Word, enacted with caring and respect, our group's perception of "transition" was broadened from a personal issue or experience to the larger notion of what it means to be human.
Early each November, members of the Prospect Center traditionally meet together for an extended weekend conference. Most recently the gathering place has been Wisdom House in Litchfield, Connecticut, selected for its rural setting and easy access from major urban centers on the east coast. For the November Conference of 2000, the volunteer planners were especially interested in what it means to teach in a child-centered classroom in the present educational climate. They knew that the Conference would provide a counter to district in-service trainings in the latest programmatic instructional model and accompanying assessment components.

Play, choice and the “making of works” are keywords for the Prospect Center. In this era of high-stakes testing and the accompanying push for a national curriculum, it is easy to forget children naturally gravitate toward play and in the process acquire skills and knowledge that are deep and long-lasting. Play presents many opportunities for choice: what, with what, where, when, how, and with whom. In schools, offering children and adolescents a range of meaningful choices in an activity-based classroom can result in writing and projects that make visible and available what children already know. Informal conversations, conferences, and more formal exhibits allow children to revise, expand, and explore new directions for learning.
The intent of this chapter is to portray the experience of attending the November Conference as a presenter. The focus is the particular nature of the ongoing reciprocity between teacher practice and the collaborative descriptive inquiry processes developed by the Prospect Center. The setting, November Conference, is an extension of the Summer Institutes. Although the time span is brief, the planners make an effort to continue the conversation begun in the summer around the same topics.

Building Collaboration before the Conference

My registration packet for the annual November Conference arrived in October, and inside, along with copies of suggested readings, was an assignment to write up a Recollection on the word, “choice.” A “Recollection,” as Prospect uses the term, is generally a personal narrative guided by focus questions. We were encouraged to make a list of “times in your childhood or adolescence when you made a choice,” and to select one upon which to expand. Included was a helpful list of prompts:

- What the choice was about.
- What you thought about the choice at the time.
- What you think about the choice now.
- The setting of your story.
- What this Recollection makes you think about choice and the process of choosing.

Participants were pre-assigned to Home Groups of six to eight people for the duration of the conference, meeting at the beginning of the conference and again at the end. Our Recollection would be given during the first sessions of the Home Group and was to last from five to ten minutes. Included in the directions was a reminder to
recollect an experience that “you would feel comfortable sharing in this public forum.” The suggestion was to help participants distinguish this focused Recollection from the sort of personal revelation one might expect to hear in a group therapy session.

Advance preparation in the form of a packet helps participants to focus on the topics of the sessions, discussions, and presentations. Planners had settled on the word, “choice” for a Recollection after they had listened to the unusual number of stories during Summer Institute that had to do with diminishing choices for both teachers and their students.

Beginning with Recollection as a way to consider the complexity and range of meanings associated with choice, they anticipated that the layers of personal as well as common meanings for the word would build over the duration of the conference. Their intent was, that when teachers returned to their classrooms, they would continue to focus on ways to offer more choices to their students.

The selection of an ordinary word such as “choice,” for a keyword was deliberate as opposed to, “democratic classrooms,” or “democracy and schooling.” The word “choice” lends itself to the description of ordinary day-to-day decisions at home and at school as well as particularly memorable events over the lifespan. Notions such as freedom of choice and democratic schools are more ideological extensions of ordinary choices that can be enacted through praxis.

Setting

Situated in the rolling Connecticut hills above Hartford, Wisdom House in Litchﬁeld offers conference goers enough dormitory space for one hundred ﬁfty participants, along with two dining halls, at an affordable price. Formerly a convent for
Benedictine nuns, the rooms are sparsely furnished and the food is simple, but delicious. Several of the nuns remain in residence to run the center and host conferences. Prospect has held its November Conference here for a number of years because of its affordability and accessible location. The rural setting provides a welcome retreat for the majority of participants who came from the urban centers of New York City, Philadelphia, and Boston. The ninety participants attending this particular conference were varied in age, race, and economic background. About one-fifth of them were men. Attendees came from all levels of public and private schools, and included teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators and college faculty.

Schedule

Participants began arriving Friday night. They were welcomed, registered, and given a sign-up sheet. The directions asked them to select three afternoon sessions out of a possible eight and to number them by preference. Participants who had driven up together from the same school or network took their materials to nearby tables in order to negotiate how they could spread themselves out among the sessions so they could share their experiences. The morning session would be their Home Group. With full-time work and family obligations, many people waited until their arrival at the conference to jot down their thoughts for the assigned Recollection. Some struggled to find a meaningful connection with a word, while others talked it over with their friends. At breakfast, the conversation often turned to, “Have you decided what to write about for your Recollection yet?”

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Opening Address

Saturday breakfast is a traditionally noisy affair. Old friends reconnected with hugs and introduced colleagues who were newcomers. After breakfast, we all gathered in the large first floor conference room, our chairs facing the lectern and a large video screen. Cecelia Traugh, Director of the Summer Institutes, delivered the framing remarks, “Choosing Where to Stand.” In it she articulated some of the larger implications of “choice” as a topic. In essence, her point was that, while politicians have the power to make educational policy decisions that can adversely impact the present and future lives of students, teachers can still make a positive difference through the daily choices we made in schools, classrooms, and in our larger communities. She asserted that taking a position which places children at the center of our work should be more public, but it would entail making videos and films, media statements, and publishing articles along with books.

Following Cecelia’s talk, Abbe Futterman, a teacher at an alternative public school in New York City, talked about and then showed a documentary film that she had made. In it she followed one boy as he went about his day in various school settings, especially outdoors in the school garden. Through filming his activities she was able to demonstrate how play, choice, and the making of works made his strengths more visible to the staff. Interspersed throughout the film were scenes of teachers, some including his mother, as they collaborated to support his learning.

During the break people were able to talk with Abbe and to ask follow-up questions about her film. She explained how she had deliberately selected scenes that depicted what the boy valued, such as pruning and planting in the garden, in order to
show how the school provisioned for learning opportunities linked to his interests. Filmed interviews with his mother helped Abbe understand how much his mother valued the school’s recognition of his strengths and the ways in which the teachers helped her to support his continuing learning at home. As we talked, other participants continued to arrive at the conference. People eventually drifted over to check the room assignment board and dispersed to their small group meetings throughout the building.

**Home Groups**

The small working or Home Groups traditionally meet on the first morning of the conference and are pre-assigned. The intention is to mix participants from different schools, networks and geographical regions. By deliberately splitting up school groups, planners hope participants will be more likely to encounter different perspectives. At the same time, varying the combinations of individuals from different schools broadens the sense of collegiality within the November Conference. As they listen, people often discover experiences and interests in common, and new personal and professional relationships have developed as a result. The friendly and caring atmosphere created by the shared Recollections in a small Home Group is unusual for a two-day educational conference.

I was delighted to find our group was meeting in The Sun Room, a glassed-in porch on the third floor with a wonderful view of the surrounding hills. There were two people in my group that I had known for some time, along with some newcomers. Together we pulled the comfortable chairs into a circle, chatting informally until everyone finally arrived.
Marta was our chairperson, a teacher of young children at an alternative elementary school in New York City. She facilitated our introductions and then began the session with the descriptive process, A Reflective Conversation on a Keyword. Briefly, this Prospect process is intended to “explore and disclose from the perspectives of a group of participants the range of meanings, images and experiences embodied in a word.” The Reflection on the Keyword, “choice,” took longer than the fifteen minutes suggested by the chair. Apparently the range of images, meanings and experiences associated with the word was greatly expanded after listening to the framing remarks, and watching the film. Giving a full, but concise Reflection takes practice and the newcomers were just learning. While the November Conference is designed to be accessible to newcomers, it was a delicate task to chair a group with mixed experience levels.

Marta took care to include people’s names as she summarized their contributions to the discussion. In her summary she noted the continuum of our choices, those we made and those that were made for us, from small daily decisions, such as what to eat for breakfast, to large lifetime decisions, such as choosing a profession. She contrasted our dreams of anticipated outcomes, impulsive choices and careful plans. Although we sometimes regretted our choices, she noted that our agreement that making them was unavoidable--to not make a choice was also a choice. Our choices defined who we eventually became. Certain things could not be chosen, such as birth, death, race, and gender.

At the end of the summary, Marta asked if there was anything that she had left out or if there was anything someone wished to add. The person next to me noted, “As
citizens in a democratic society, we have an implied obligation to make informed choices.” Others posed questions: Are the knowledge and authority of teachers recognized in the choices they are offered? How much choice do teachers really have in shaping their curriculums? In what ways do schools offer children authentic choices? How can we help them to choose in ways that will support their learning? These questions, along with the summary were recorded by the note taker.

After a short break we were ready to resume with our Recollections. Marta distributed the remaining hour of time among the seven of us, suggesting that someone volunteer to be a timekeeper. She also reminded us that confidentiality was an important consideration of being in a small group. For some newcomers, preparing a thoughtful personal statement in advance for a Recollection, as well as speaking to strangers, uninterrupted for ten or more minutes, can be unnerving. Aware of this, experienced participants often volunteer to speak first. As the chairperson, Marta worked to promote an inclusive atmosphere of respect and encouragement.

In one memorable story, Evie told us how, as a high school student, she was aware that many of her teachers made negative judgments about her character without any knowledge of her difficult family situation. One teacher chose to befriend her, guiding her to make better personal, as well as educational, choices. Her close relationship with this teacher was a significant influence in her eventual decision to become an educator herself.

Participants in the adjoining rooms were beginning to leave for lunch as Marta briefly summarized the key phrases and ideas of our Recollections. She reminded us again of the confidential nature of our group and gave us some questions to think about.
for tomorrow's meeting: "What was memorable for you during the Conference and why? What new questions were raised? How might this relate to your own teaching?" On her way out the volunteer note taker handed Marta notes of our session so that she could refer to them during our second meeting.

As I left the group and headed downstairs for lunch, I continued thinking about our recent meeting. Looking around the already full dining room, I joined a table of people whom I didn't recognize, but who appeared lively and interesting. From the remarks I overheard, many of them were talking about what had happened in our sessions. I also noticed that newcomers, who had eaten breakfast with their school groups, were now spread out and getting to know other participants. Even waiting in line to deposit our dishes in the kitchen before heading off to the next session, people continued to talk about the sessions.

Afternoon Schedule

The November Conference is voluntarily organized. Whether they are participants or presenters, they have chosen to join others to explore the complexities of teaching. The support and insight they gain each year in return for their efforts has been enough to maintain the November Conference as an ongoing event over twenty years, despite the hours of volunteer time needed to plan and coordinate it.

Eight concurrent sessions were offered that afternoon. Based on the prioritized lists that they had filled out on arrival, participants had been assigned to the following small group sessions:
A Descriptive Review of a Child.

- A second/third grade teacher looking for ways to better the relationship with a student.
- A high school teacher exploring how the school regarded the education of a student who did not plan to attend college.
- A teacher looking for respectful ways to support the learning of a student who appears to be reading below grade level.

A Description of Work

- A spanning collection of student work;
- Student science conversations.
- An Issues Conversation
- What it means to document student work.

A Review of Practice

- A teacher educator looking at her own work as focusing on relationship.
- A teacher of thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds exploring her offerings of choice and use of materials to students.

Planning the Descriptive Review of a Child

What follows is an account of my preparation for a Descriptive Review of the Child, one of the more familiar processes developed by the Prospect Center. A more detailed account of this particular process can be found in Appendix C. The purpose of this section is to show how a collaborative inquiry process, such as the Review, supports a teacher’s day-to-day interaction with students in a classroom.

In late October, I received an e-mail from Patricia Carini asking if I could fill in as a presenter for someone who, because of circumstances, was unable to attend the conference. I had preregistered, although I was not intending to be there the entire time. The dates for the November Conference always conflict with the annual parent meetings that begin the Monday afterwards. Since I was already assembling and organizing the children’s work, presenting at the conference would a bit easier. Despite the fact that there were only fifteen days to prepare, I knew from the experience of participating in other Reviews that the process and the outcome would be beneficial for both the child and my teaching.
As I began to prepare for the conference, I kept in mind the larger conference topic of “Maker, Player, and the Importance of Choice.” My friend, who was unable to present, had proposed the topic “children who prefer projects and are often reluctant readers.” I liked this idea because it could be used to address the playfulness that is often involved in making things. I thought of several students from my third grade classroom who had already generated a fair amount of work, and narrowed my choices down to Josh, a pseudonym. He stood out to me because of the discrepancy between his strong skills as a writer and visual artist, and his emerging skills as a reader. Josh’s capacity to imagine something and then create it, both visually and in writing, was striking. He was also a very quiet child who couldn’t sit still for long.

Josh’s voice was barely audible when he read aloud with me, which made it particularly difficult to assess his skills. He clearly struggled with multi-syllabic and unfamiliar vocabulary words. As an artist himself, Josh naturally gravitated towards picture books with minimal text. For several days in succession I observed him returning to the same book during sustained silent reading, a humorous picture book about a boy who shrinks to the size of an ant. At that time we were immersed in the study of insects.

During small group book discussions he preferred to listen, and when called upon, answered in as few words as possible. His written responses in his learning log were short and he was reluctant to expand them. Standardized reading tests administered in mid-September to the whole class revealed that Josh had lower scores in vocabulary and comprehension than many of the students. I found this puzzling because he was an unusually good writer.
Because it was so early in the school year, I was concerned that I would not have enough classroom observations of Josh to create a meaningful portrayal. During an initial telephone interview with Pat Carini, I described Josh, along with aspects of his work which interested me. After a few follow-up questions, we agreed that he would be a good fit for the kind of Descriptive Review intended in the original proposal.

After our conversation, however, I had more questions. Were the descriptions I had given to Pat on the telephone really accurate? Would they hold over time? I knew some observations were more situational, and others more general. How could I best depict Josh? In order to fill out my own observations, I sought out his other teachers, a step that is highly recommended when preparing a Review. His art teacher was especially helpful. Next I made an appointment to see Josh and his family at home so that, together, we could select samples of work that he had done over the years. They kindly invited me for tea on a Sunday afternoon.

I had sent out a brief parent questionnaire in the fall on which his mother had noted his tendency to be silly and his need to focus. I had not found these things to be a particular problem and was instead more concerned with his reading progress. Working closely with families is enjoyable, and I looked forward to a more informal meeting with Josh in his own setting. They were quite welcoming as Josh was sent to bring his work into their living room. He selected the items that he thought people would enjoy seeing. At one point, he disappeared only to reappear holding a painting with its back towards me. After he turned it around, he explained that it was an early painting by his father and was the sort of thing to which he aspired. I left their house with a wonderful array of materials representing work from a very early age to the present. I now felt more
confident that a detailed portrayal of Josh was possible. A copy of my presentation for
the Descriptive Review containing this account, along with classroom observations of
Josh can be found in Appendix C.

Following the family visit, Pat and I continued our conversations by telephone
and e-mail. As the chairperson of our session, her role was to assist me in framing the
review and to help keep the content centered around the focusing question. Throughout
our planning, she periodically summarized what I said, and then posed new questions
which increased the specificity of my observations. Each time we talked she noted a few
key phrases or anecdotes that she later used to help us plan out the flow of the
Descriptive Review.

A little more than a week after our first talk, Pat sent an e-mail containing a
tentative sequence for the presentation, along with approximate times. Our focusing
question had taken shape: “Karen wants our help in discovering ways to build on Josh’s
capacities in order to support and foster reading, without signaling him out, or going
against him.” While the “focusing question” is not a question in the usual sense of the
word, Prospect Center uses the term as a way to frame an inquiry conversation. The
sustained focus culminates in recommendations at the end of the Review.

The night before the conference I had the time to edit my presentation in order to
select words for a clear portrayal of Josh. From past experience I knew that the more
precise I could be, the easier it would be for participants to envision what he was like.
Since there would be samples of Josh’s writing and artwork on display during this
Review he could, in a sense, speak for himself through his work. I made copies of two
stories and several of the smaller drawings to hand out to participants.
The amount of time preparing and planning for a Descriptive Review is usually considerable for both presenter and chairperson. I was able to speak with knowledge and confidence about what I knew because of the close collaboration with other teachers, Pat, and Josh’s family. A sense of Josh over time and in a variety of settings came from talks with former teachers and specialists. During my visit, his family contributed by opening up their collection of his work and sharing stories of what he was like growing up. By asking Josh to choose the pieces he especially liked, I had a better sense of what he valued about his work along with the subject matter that he found appealing.

The Afternoon Descriptive Review Session

After lunch, Pat Carini and I arrived about twenty-five minutes early to prepare for the session. The second floor room was furnished with two small couches and a number of comfortable armchairs, interspersed with an assortment of small tables and lamps. Afternoon light filtered in through the large picture window overlooking the Connecticut hills. We pushed furniture into a circle, hung up Josh’s artwork with masking tape, and set out samples of his writing, all the while discussing and planning. As people started to arrive, they exclaimed over the striking artwork, taking time to look more closely before they sat down. Eventually everyone who had signed up arrived, making a group of fourteen including Pat and myself. Placing a limit on the size of the group assured that everyone would have the time to contribute as well as ask questions. After people settled into their places they got out their note pads and pens. We would have at least three hours for our session.

Pat Carini began by introducing us both and giving a brief overview of what people could expect from the Review. The intent, she noted, was to paint a full and
balanced picture of Josh that was neither judgmental nor categorical, adding that this was a “constructed conversation.” She stressed that the language used to describe the family was especially important, “because all language is value laden.” As an example of how descriptive language can shape our thinking, she asked us to be aware of differences between the commonly used phrase, “the child comes from a single parent family,” and “the child lives with her mother.” She then added a quote from Cicero, “If I didn’t have my circle of listeners, I could not think to speak,” saying that our activeness as listeners contributed to the Review. Pat reminded participants that they would be expected to make recommendations that I could apply in my classroom, including specific books or materials that Josh might like. Finally she alerted us to the fact that recommendations can be conflicting, but that it would be all right if they were.

Reflection on the Word, “Look. Looking”

We had decided to begin the session with a shortened version of A Reflection on a Keyword. We had selected the words “look” or “looking,” because in many of Josh’s drawings, the eye was a focal point and his stories were descriptive and visual. During class activities he was often more an observer than an active participant, and he enjoyed pointing out things for me to look at. Since newcomers had participated in the earlier Reflection on “choice,” there was no need to give lengthy directions. Pat reminded us, however, that the Reflection was meant to serve as a transition to the Review while expanding our sense of what it means “to look.”

The room quieted as people took out their materials and began writing. Occasionally a person would pause to look up at one of Josh’s drawings displayed on the wall and then resume writing. After about ten minutes it appeared that most of them had
finished and Pat asked someone to volunteer to begin. She paused a minute to organize her summary, and then told us how she had jotted down their contributions under headings as she listened.

Briefly noted, the summary of the Reflection highlighted the following:

- Looking is more of an act involving perception, while seeing is more intentional and focused. Looking involves both thought and choice.
- In terms of emotion and gesture, how one person looks at another can communicate volumes.
- Seeing the spirit of something involves looking beneath the surface.
- “Look at my picture” and “Look at me” are common phrases in elementary classrooms. Direct eye contact and an attentive response by the teacher communicates recognition and caring.
- There are cultural taboos about looking, such as where to look, how long, and at whom.
- We look, through memory and the imagination, within ourselves.
- Artists and scientists look to discover.
- Tools such as microscopes and telescopes enhance our looking.
- Looking at you doesn’t necessarily equate with having a child’s attention.

The Focusing Question

Out of respect for the child and the family, Pat asked us to focus on the child’s strengths and capacities. Ideally they could be present at the Review and feel comfortable being talked about, and she reminded us of the trust and confidentiality associated with a Review. Next she read the focusing question: “Because he is a child
with many capacities and strengths, but who is reported to be below grade level in reading, with the fourth grade tests looming, Karen wants our help in discovering ways to build on his capacities in order to support and foster reading, without signaling him out, or going against him.” This question was deliberately constructed to elicit support for Josh’s capacities. By providing a clear, full portrait, participants would be able to draw on their own work in classrooms to make recommendations.

Presentation and Summary

Although I had written up a full description of Josh, I was familiar enough with the text so that I could make an oral presentation. At the end I quickly referred back to it to make sure that I had left nothing out. Speaking without notes made it easier point to out artwork, or hold up a writing sample. Since the presenter speaks without interruption for up to thirty minutes, the brief summary by the chair that follows helps to remind people of the main points and the focusing question.

Notes that I took of Pat’s summary stated that Josh was quiet and even, but also expressive and bouncy. When he’s in charge, he’s the decider and he participates, but resists that which is set out for him—and distances it. Josh can stop before the task is finished and can carry on a task over several days. He is capable of working on multiple levels. Spirals, staircases, and pits are common images in his stories and drawings. He is adept with physical relations, and is intrigued with the hidden. Josh is deeply investigative. He was described by his teachers as being both “silly” and “radiant.” When he is excited about something he has discovered, and would like others to join him, he fairly glows. When he is writing Josh is in charge. He wants to practice his reading, and he wants to be a better oral reader, but he resists assessment. Josh has high aspirations, and he aspires to be like his brother or his uncle. He may exaggerate his brother’s accomplishments and set those up as a goal for himself, such as reading Poppy when it is clearly difficult for him. Josh is invested in doing well. He can be independent, self-sufficient, as well as join in. He can screen everything out when he is deeply engaged. He makes himself non-obtrusive, and he is subtle. He
doesn’t put himself at the center, but enjoys standing alongside others and looking together at the thing itself, such as an emerging butterfly or the hatching of spiders from an egg case. Josh is often seated on the far edge of a class circle. You can see a lot from the periphery.

Pat added more at this point: “Another question in Karen’s mind is how provisioning the classroom influences what, as a teacher, she is able to see and know about a child—and how that plays into the child’s access to learning and to the child’s access to educational opportunities.” By adding another layer to our original question, Pat was drew the group’s attention to the main topics of the conference: the use of play and the making of works as legitimate ways of knowing. During the presentation and the summary, participants could see that Josh’s playful, humorous spirit was evident in the artwork on the walls and in his stories.

Questions, Comments, and Discussion

Pat and I had set aside a fair amount of time for the questioning period so that as a group we could fill out the picture of Josh. Since the teacher’s presentation of the child is deliberately uninterrupted to help her maintain a focus participants had jotted down their questions as they listened. Some people took a few minutes to look through their notes as others began to talk. Pat moderated the questioning period by calling on people and noted when a comment was more of a recommendation than a question. She also called our attention to questions which implied unwarranted inferences or a psychological interpretations. Questions about the child’s home situation are also not within the parameter of a Review.

During our discussion there were many questions about reading instruction in general that may well have been a reflection of the larger conversation that is presently taking place on a national level. Broadly conceived, reading is complex and our
discussion touched on topics such as direct instruction, whole language, balanced reading, guided reading, developmental reading, state and national standards, normative testing, alternative assessment, reading for understanding, phonics, comprehension, and the relationship of writing to reading. The following is a sample of the questions that were asked.

- His aspirations are so high. Have you regularly listened to him read one-on-one?

- Reading and reading aloud are two very different things; the latter is a performance. What are his parents' concerns around his reading and writing?

- Have you used running records?

- He is a sophisticated thinker and his stories reveal a richness in vocabulary. Can he read his own work aloud fluently? Does he substitute words when he reads his own stories aloud?

- It seems that he doesn’t expect to have to speak.

- He listens intently, and uses the stories he heard to promote his own writing.

  Can he read Charlotte's Web on his own? What parts?

Their many questions caused me to restate or enlarge upon what I had said earlier. When questions seemed to veer off into instructional theory, Pat would guide us back to the particularities of Josh and my focusing question. Initially I felt that my teaching, rather than Josh, was becoming the focus of the review, until I realized that all of us were feeling the tension of accountability while striving to keep the child at the center of our work in this climate of uniform standards. We were asking that the group temporarily set aside teacher accountability in order to help construct a portrait of Josh as a reader with
emerging skills. At the same time, we wanted them to keep in mind his preferences for "play, choice and making works." This was a great deal to ask of newcomers, many of whom were new teachers as well and were just becoming comfortable with the descriptive processes. In our preplanning we had decided that this would be a good time to take a ten minute break.

Recommendations

With its focus on the capabilities and strengths of one child, the systematic, rule-bound process of the Review maintained the positive intent of the inquiry. Pat briefly summarized the additional information from the questioning period, and for the last time, restated the focusing question. This restatement assured that the emphasis was on Josh and the possible ways I could support his reading in my particular classroom. As we began the next segment of the review, recommendations, they took a few moments to study Josh’s artwork on the walls, skimmed the samples of his stories and reviewed their notes.

Some of the recommendations offered applied to the class in general, such as addressing reading issues in a parent newsletter or having books on tape available. Others were more specific to Josh, such as encouraging a relationship with a younger child in the kindergarten through regular visits where he might read aloud. During individual instruction times someone thought that I might think of ways to consistently reflect back to him the progress that he was making. Another person suggested using the analogy of how Josh worked to acquire artistic skills to help him see that he could become a better reader: practicing daily, sitting alongside adults who were skilled, watching them work, asking questions, and trying things out on his own.
As a teacher with thirty years of experience, my classroom was well provisioned, and I already had in place many of their suggested approaches to reading. However, the discussion and recommendations were helpful for thinking about the ways I could personalize reading instruction to build on particular Josh's interests and initiative. Often presenters bring a map of their classroom to a Review, along with a detailed copy of a daily schedule. If I had done this, it would have avoided some of the confusion about my instruction and provisioning for language arts, however, with upcoming parent conferences, I had little time for extra preparations of this nature.

Evaluation

A Descriptive Review generally ends with an evaluation. The group was asked to consider "How was respect for Josh, for his family, and for Karen as the presenting teacher, enacted?" In conclusion, Pat again reminded the group of privacy issues, but invited them to write Josh a note if they wished. Later that evening, several people gave me notes to pass on. He was quite pleased to receive them because they were encouraging and so appreciative of his strengths.

The underlying intent of this Review was to portray a child's engagement with text, and through his works, to determine his interests and preferences in order to support his skills as a developing reader. Although the session had officially ended, several people were so engaged with the topic that they stayed for another twenty minutes and continued to raise questions about reading. I noted a few of their remarks.
• How long should a teacher spend building a relationship of trust with a student?
• When should a teacher intervene with deliberate instruction, especially when a child is clearly experiencing reading delays? Can this really be done in a more holistic manner, one that doesn’t single out the child, and cause discomfort?
• Giving children a choice about which book to read is a different matter than giving them a choice to read or not to read at a particular moment.
• To believe that we should allow space for children to move into reading in a way that is supportive of their values and preferences certainly enlarges the discussion on reading instruction.
• Teaching a skill is also teaching a particular child and there are many opportunities throughout the day that involve reading.
• Reading is a complex notion and not simply a matter of imparting and then assessing, skills.
• It’s puzzling that a child could be more skilled as a writer than a reader. What are the implications of that for instruction?

Our focusing question was intended to provoke participants to think more about that nature of reading and the variety of ways in which children engage with text. For example, my friend, who was to have been the original presenter, was interested in beginning an inquiry into those children who thrive in project-based environments but are often reluctant readers. Pat and I hoped that when participants returned to their classrooms that our session would continue to raise questions their own reading instruction. Since many of the participants who come to the November Conference also

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attend regular network study groups they have an ongoing forum in which to address their concerns.

Summary

Through this Descriptive Review presentation my collaboration with colleagues and Josh’s family extended to include other teachers in the Northeast. In return, their attentiveness returned to my classroom in the form of recommendations to support Josh’s reading, and to Josh, himself, in personal notes of appreciation and encouragement. I gained new insights about Josh as a reader as seen through their eyes. I thought more about choices in my classroom pertaining to reading that had implications for the other children as well. For example, lately I have been interested creating a better balance in between using fiction and non-fiction for instruction and grounding it in the particularly topic of study. I determined to find more picture books with thematic content, such as the story about the boy turning into the size of an ant that was so appealing to Josh.

During the year that followed, I deliberately let Josh’s choices lead my instruction, as I supported and guided him. Shortly before Christmas he made a tremendous leap from choosing to read picture books to beginning Poppy, a children’s novel his older brother enjoyed. He patiently and slowly worked his way through it during independent reading times, and then went on to read other books from this series written by Avi that feature the same characters. Josh’s quiet enthusiasm for this author was contagious and at least a third of the class joined him in reading and talking about these books for the rest of the year.

In his literacy portfolio Josh wrote about wanting to be a better reader and set about doing it in a determined yet playful way that suited his nature. At the end of the
year his standardized test scores showed significant gains, progress that was already evident in his written responses and in his increased participation during book discussion groups. One of the projects he did that year stands out in particular. It was a small painted sculpture of a character from the book, *Bunnicula*, about a vampire rabbit. A white cat stands astride a large, red slab of steak, pushing a pole into the middle of it. A play on the words, “steak” and “stake” in the form of a visual image from a humorous book.

In her framing remarks, Cecelia Traugh linked personal choice and agency as they applied to both children and teachers. Throughout the Conference sessions that followed we heard how others were working to observe, recognize, and support the good choices that children and adolescents could make. In her film Abbe Futterman demonstrated that when a school is provisioned to invite choice, it creates an environment where children's capacities, inclinations and strengths are respected and can be fostered by both parents and teachers. Encouraged by the positive reactions to her work, she has begun looking for wider, public distribution.

Later that evening the Conference continued more informally as people gathered in animated clusters throughout the small seating areas in the dorm. Manuscripts were circulated for feedback. Several university faculty and teachers interested in using descriptive process in teacher development met for discussion and planning. Outside my bedroom door, graduate students in an intern cohort group talked late into the night.

The November Conference provides a brief location set apart from the demands of the workplace to reconnect with colleagues around shared values in turbulent times. Rather than becoming discouraged, they provide one another with examples of hope.
through small changes along with possibilities for action that inspire in the form of recommendations, publications, or Abbe's film. To quote Patricia Carini's paper of a talk that was included in our packets, "... the power of recovery from violence and force against children, against us all, is in our hands" (2000, p. 19).
CHAPTER EIGHT

RECOLLECTIONS: LOOKING BACK

A mere recital of facts is not history, not even if scientifically testable hypotheses are added to them; only the setting of them in the concrete, at times, opaque, but continuous, rich, full texture of ‘real life’--the intersubjective, directly recognizable continuum of experience--will do.

Isaiah Berlin
The Sense of Reality, p. 26

During the 1999 Summer Institute II, I chaired a three-day morning seminar with a small group of experienced participants. The majority of our time was spent reading over and charting materials from two previous Institutes spaced ten years apart, 1983 in particular. We looked for recurrent themes, keywords and continuing threads of interest. For our last meeting I asked the participants in our small group to think of an incident or time in connection with the Institutes that particularly stood out to them. For example, it might be a memory that surfaced periodically as they were engaged in some related task, or a story that they told to others because it held particular meaning. My hope was that the individual recollections would reveal more about the interplay of their personal histories and the larger history of the Institutes around the concept of collaboration and collegiality. On the assumption that “experience is both temporal and storied,” and out of respect for the tellers, the excerpts are longer (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998). Drawing on a timeline that I constructed, each recollection is situated in the larger context of the particular Institute in which it occurred. [See Appendix D.]
In *Looking Back and Thinking Forward*, Lilian Weber (1997) often refers to something she calls an “entry point.” In her observations she notes that each of us is naturally drawn to that which interests us, a recognition characterized by curiosity and excitement that impels us forward. Lately this term has been used during the Institutes to describe the ways in which individuals engage with the topics and themes of each Institute, through readings, small group work, non-verbal explorations, and whole group seminars. In this particular session, each person’s recollection revealed their interests, preferences, and a glimpse of what they valued. The experiences described were often a turning point, a shift in how they perceived themselves or their work. Often an insight lead to actions that in turn provoked new thoughts and questions to explore.

Lisa’s Recollection: Formation of Knowledge through Visual Arts

Lisa is a recently retired early childhood teacher from a large urban center on the east coast. She recalled the Institute of 1986, “Reflections on ‘Works’: Friendship, and the Formation of Knowledge in Childhood and Adulthood.” Originally trained as an artist, Lisa was asked to bring selections of her artwork for a small group description. Our common readings that summer were from Alfred North Whitehead, Max Scheler, Robert Coles, Evelyn Fox Keller, and Michael Armstrong. Questions framing the small group sessions were: What is the role of the arts in education? What are some of the key questions that underlie the sciences? How are these related to children’s intuitions and questions reflected in their works?

During two lectures in particular, Patricia Carini talked about “the tensions between bodies of knowledge and forming knowledge; between the clarity of the boundary circumscribing received knowledge and the vaguer and wider contexts of
understanding embraced in the activity of discovery; between process (potential) and products (achievements).” Throughout the Institute, Lisa’s portfolio was available for informal viewing so that participants could prepare for the three small groups that would each have a piece for a Descriptive Reviews Work.

Lisa was part of a group of experienced educators who brought their classroom research projects to North Bennington in the early seventies in order to work with Pat Carini and the staff of Prospect School. As a trained artist, Lisa was particularly interested in the processes used at the school to describe children’s artwork. Since then she has kept detailed journals of her first and second grade classrooms as she worked with the children and their parents. Over the years she has drawn on examples from these journals to publish essays and monographs.

In the years since I started working at Prospect, Beth [Alberty] and Pat had developed a method of describing student work, so that by 1985 we had done a lot. We had looked for continuity and change over time of the student works. We had also described photographs before then. More on my own, but certainly it was always in the forefront for all of us, was the influence of work by well-known artists—especially since the Clark Museum was right down the street from where we were housed at Williams College.

I was invited to bring work from the collection that I have of my own work from about the age of twelve through high school. I brought pencil sketches that I used to do on the subway from the time that I was about twelve. Some ink sketches—I used to sketch all the time, usually people. I brought two pieces of sculpture. One was a head of an African-American woman and the other was a nude figure. Both of them were done in plasticene and then made into plaster-of-paris from molds. I brought a book of sketches for wall hangings that I had done from the mid-seventies on. There was a compilation of sketches (I had continued to do those) in pencil and ink and then a completed wall hanging. Pat was interested in the sketches partly because of the work-in-progress nature of them, the less self-conscious quality of them, and the fact that you could really see the hand much better than you can in a finished wall hanging.

So we broke into three groups. I can’t remember, but one group wanted to describe the sculpture and one group might have described the sketches of people. The group that I was in described the sketches for wall hangings and the completed work. One of the major things was that this whole idea of
describing a sketch was important to me, because it really was my medium. When I was in college, we went to Fleischer Art Memorial to graphic sketch class. I was really good at that, and the instructor said, "Oh well, anyone can do that, but it's the finished work that is really important. Anyone can do a sketch and make it look good." Obviously I didn't get rid of my sketches because she said that. So—to have all this time spent talking about my sketches was really quite something!

I was surprised by the description of the finished piece that I had worked on at Prospect from start to finish, the Sunnyside-Up Egg piece, done in two shades of white. I was so surprised at the description, because what I aimed for in my finished piece and what I was drawn to were brought forward to me. And it wasn't conscious—I didn't realize it. Certain shapes appeared again and again, circles inside of circles, inside of circles. Another image was of rocks that fit together—aerial views of ancient sites, and I remember you said that, Kate. So those were all things that I was drawn to, but I didn't realize that they were there in the work! They were made especially apparent by people who described the imagery that the pieces evoked. I also remember the words "generative" and "deep" because a lot of the images had to do with life forms. Another bunch of images had to do with bedrock, rock solid, and ancient rock. It was like being given a window into or a reflection of what I valued.

The following year I went to England where I got a chance to buy every postcard I could of aerial views of ancient sites. And I took as many pictures as I could of stone walls. And as you all know, these are still things that interest me, the way bricks fit together, the way rocks fit together in a human made work, sometimes natural rock formations too.

That summer Lisa had an opportunity to have her own work described back to her with the same care, respect, and seriousness of purpose that she had used to describe children's work since she first started coming to Prospect Center. She was already aware that she constructed her knowledge through the eye and through the hand. Looking through her collection of artwork from the age of twelve, she could now trace its continuity of line and forms.

After listening to our descriptions, Lisa became more aware of what kinds of shapes intrigued her; her preference for sketching as a way of thinking through a project, and the importance to her of how shapes were related to one another in an over-all composition. She noted how our descriptive session helped her to recognize aspects of
her work which had not been visible to her before, reflecting back to her meanings she may have sensed but not verbalized. Now she intentionally uses what she learned in this session to explore new directions in her fiber sculptures which are inspired by the photographs of stone walkways, walls, and natural rock formations that she has taken.

As Lisa experienced a small group description of her own adult artwork, she found evidence of her own formation of knowledge, values and standards. In taking the time to look and describe Lisa’s work we affirmed her capacity as maker, so that our description became a form of recognition as well. The session describing Lisa’s work later became a resource for thinking about art as a way of knowing in the Institutes which followed.

**Arielle’s Recollection: Documentation and Reflection**

Arielle has been involved with the Prospect Center since the early seventies. As an Archive Scholar she spent a year in residence helping to catalog the student collections of work for the creation of the Archive. During that time she also participated in the ongoing teacher study groups at the Prospect School. Arielle has occasionally been a consultant for groups and schools interested in descriptive processes and was a co-instructor for Institute I for two summers. As an intermediate teacher for many years in a model alternative school in New York City, she helped to implement the use of descriptive inquiry practices there. Arielle has always had a strong interest in curriculum development. Over the years she headed up curriculum reviews at her school, taught a philosophy of education course at a local university, and has published several articles about her work with children. Due to a recent major illness, she is no longer a classroom
teacher. She continues, however, to work in the school as a reading tutor and will soon retire.

The Summer Institute, 1983, “Community and the Individual: The Interplay of Interests,” was the setting for Arielle’s recollection. That summer there was a particular emphasis on autobiography and personal recollection as part of an ongoing exploration of sources of knowledge. We read Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, by James Joyce, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” by Georges Gusdorf in James Olney’s, Autobiography (1956), and Paul Fussell’s The Great War and Modern Memory.

Another continuing strand was looking at current issues in national testing and educational reports in terms of teacher authority and knowledge. The Reflections on Keywords that summer addressed both topics: play, perspective, name/naming, value/valuing, care/caring, and adolescence.

Very early on, after the reading study was well under way at Prospect in the early eighties, when I got a new group of kids every single year I did a description of each youngster according to the headings on the “Descriptive Review.” I just made that part of my regular practice after the first couple of weeks. It was enormously useful. It was something that you said, Brian, that reminded me how important that was, because in a school where everybody knows everybody, and most of the kids stay from pre-K on, you make certain assumptions from what you’ve heard, from what you’ve seen, and how we talked about them. Then sitting down and actually describing this kid in my room gave me a way of trying to get a different fix—especially on those kids who were a little more challenging than others.

There is a very clear connection with how the collaborative thinking here gets moved out into the school and into practice. In the early days we used to spend a lot of time talking about the implications for practice. Not recipes, but rather, how does this get worked into what you do, all this Heidegger, this philosophy? Another year you brought all your kids’ writing, Lisa. I remember it was wonderful to read. Then we did a reflection on "name." That was important to me and I still have a copy of it.

So I went back in September and did a curriculum on names and naming that started with some of the ideas that I had gotten from Lisa’s piece—but I also thought about it and gave it my own spin that year. I used a lot from the reflection when we talked about it in class and when we did research on the
origins of names. That curriculum evolved a year or two later into a curriculum on names and autobiography. We interviewed parents, grandparents, and family members about “Where does my name come from?” I was teaching fifth and sixth graders so it really lent itself to interviewing, reading, writing and sharing.

We had at some point done a seminar on autobiography, and I remember an article on “What does it mean when someone writes an autobiography?” a scholarly article on consciousness and awareness of self, one Pat had emphasized in the seminar: She mentioned that there couldn't be autobiography until people thought of themselves as "selves," unique and distinct. I remembered pieces of that and that it was very dense and hard, but I dug out the article and I dug out the notes, and reviewed the naming curriculum. One summer I did a presentation on that curriculum.

So then I did a “heavy duty” curriculum on autobiography, and that’s a piece of work that I’m really proud of. That kind of teaching and learning, and sharing and showing, and leading and growing. That all comes out of Prospect --sometimes in direct lines, and sometimes unconsciously--I don’t analyze every single thing that I do! I started to think about how much of it is simply, implicitly, there. If someone were to run a camera all day long and someone was to analyze it minute by minute, it would be difficult to see because so much of what I do now is how I teach and what I do. It’s no longer separate.

Since Arielle has been associated with the Summer Institutes from their beginning, the reciprocity between her teaching and her work with the Prospect Center was ongoing. Intrigued by the notion of taking some small idea back to her classroom, she shaped it to suit her setting, implemented it, all the while documenting her work in her classroom journal. Each summer she brought her journals to the Institute where she would read them through in order to rework her curriculum. This occurred through informal conversations with other participants or Descriptive Reviews of small sections in an afternoon session. In the summer of 1983 she presented a longer, more in-depth Review of Curriculum with a focus on her work in social studies. She found her work immensely satisfying and was pleased that it engaged the children in her classes as well.

Although Arielle purposefully set out to develop and organize a curriculum, she admitted that the implementation resulted from her tacit understanding: “I don’t analyze
every single thing that I do! I started to think about was how much of it is simply, implicitly, *there.*” The ways in which she observed and recorded her perceptions of the children in her classes had become second nature, grounded in her early commitment to write up a Descriptive Review of each student in her class.

She acknowledges that the ideas and inspiration for her work have come from learning about what others in the group were doing, crediting people such as Lisa. Engaging with the larger ideas around the interplay between community and individual generated from the readings, Pat Carini’s talks, and her own study of autobiography, Arielle spent several years developing an in-depth, “heavy duty” curriculum. She once told me, “I think it’s the merging of that rigorous intellectual work, combined with the talk about kids and the work with the Archive that actually taught me how to be a teacher.”

During our small group, Arielle recalled the time when several participants drove her part way home to meet her husband, talking the whole way about the readings and the sessions. Greeting her after two weeks, her husband asked, “How was the Institute?” After listening for a while he stopped her saying, “You’re not speaking English!” We are all aware that spending two weeks, eight hours a day, of intense collaborative work around shared content can infuse a simple keyword or phrase with a great deal of meaning. When used as shorthand in conversation among participants, they refer to a much larger context that baffles and amuses outsiders.

**Judy’s Recollection: The Importance of Story**

Judy’s account recalls the Summer Institute of 1988, “Ways of Knowing.” The larger question for the Institute was, “What are the characteristics of a curriculum when
children/young people are assumed to be active makers of knowledge?” The main readings were John Berger’s *Another Way of Telling*, Jean Piaget’s *Six Psychological Studies*, and Howard Gardner’s *Frames of Mind*. That summer Patricia Carini invited interested participants to help her describe tape-recorded interviews. As part of a Ford Foundation grant, she was completing a follow-up study on young adults whom she had evaluated earlier for the New York state Prekindergarten Program. Carini’s original longitudinal study took place in a variety of sites throughout the state and eventually became the subject of a monograph published in 1982: *The School Lives of Seven Children: A Five Year Study*.

Judy had read this monograph before attending the Institute in 1988 and elected to participate in the afternoon sessions to describe the recorded interviews of the students. The group worked with transcriptions, listening multiple times to short sections from a taped interview with Kenny, a pseudonym. The adverse impact that schools and schooling can have on a child’s life was evident in the tapes, and it is that to which Judy refers in her Recollection. At that time she was a professor in a small college in Appalachia. Supervising interns on site, she frequently interacted with children who had experiences similar to Kenny’s.

But in deciding what to talk about really, it was the first year I was here, and we met at Prospect School—how being in the school was so important to me. It was the year I had read School Lives and I was in the group that got to meet Kenny [a pseudonym]. Wow! What a privilege. He had come alive in School Lives, but he really came alive as an eighteen-year-old man. We heard his voice and we saw what schools did to him... and I remember having to go back home, and I still do, dealing with the anger that I felt. *How that should never happen to any child!* He was very much a presence there, his artwork, his voice, his transcript, everything. He was very much there.

I still think about that, and when I go into the classroom, any classroom, my own classroom, Kenny comes forward. And every semester, in every class I try to keep that alive, so that anyone I touch will think about the
Kennys in their class. That was also the year that we did a reflection on the word, “excellent/ excellence,” and I have never ever used that word again--to the point that I cringe when I hear it, when I see it in advertising. That’s a real good way to get me not to buy something!

In a Review of Practice that she presented during one summer, Judy described her efforts to advocate for her students and for their cooperating teachers. Recommendations from her Review helped her to implement what she had learned while working on the interview tapes with Kenny. He embodies, for her, the life-long implications for students who are not viewed as active makers of knowledge and she is committed to keeping him present for herself and for her students.

As a storyteller herself, Judy easily relates to stories about people’s lives. Pat Carini once said in one of her morning seminars, “The stories we tell one another release us from our solitude, and free us from conventional theory in order to gain an understanding of others.” Visiting Judy at her college and driving out to a small rural school to meet the children and teachers with whom she works, I experienced first-hand the strong, caring relationships she has developed. Judy has collaborated with cooperating teachers to write and publish articles, the most recent of which describes the negative impact of a computerized reading program on a fifth grade language arts curriculum. This year she has moved on to another faculty position in an upper-Midwestern university where she can be closer to her extended family.

Brian’s Recollections: Observation and Reflection

Brian, an elementary teacher in a small community school from the rural northeast has been coming regularly to Prospect since 1989. After consulting with several teachers from the Prospect School, he began a study group in his school which met regularly to describe children’s work and to present Descriptive Reviews of students.
Parents noticed their children's positive responses to school and talked about it during conferences. The administration and staffing of Brian's school changed markedly several years ago when the principal left, joined by several key members of the staff. With their departure, the momentum for using descriptive inquiry processes dissipated. He now thinks of himself as "The Lone Prospector." Coming to the Institute provides an opportunity for Brian to collaborate with others in ways that suit his intellect. He enjoys having the time to read and think, and takes a leadership role in chairing major seminar sessions.

Nineteen ninety-nine was the year that we did a *Close Reading of Lives on the Boundary* by Mike Rose, and that was a very instructive session for me. Pat was the chair. It was interesting to watch the chairing because I realized that it didn't have to be quite as prescriptive as I thought it had to be up to that point, having been to Institute I. Being a beginner, you are kind of looking for a guide book sometimes. I think people who do that are sometimes strict in terms of following a certain procedure. It might be part of my nature to be that way anyway.

That process of Pat's chairing helped to loosen my boundaries when I realized you didn't always have to go around in a certain order, and yet she was very precise in terms of facilitating that, but at the same time inviting—making spaces for thought. The other thing about it was that it helped to gently down the hard edges of my categorical thinking . . . I still have a tendency to perhaps reduce things a little too much. It's not so much reducing things now as a kind of quick clusterings of things which may exclude other ideas. I at least think I am much more able to quickly catch myself on that, and also more able to hear others as they reflect back to me that I may be doing that.

Through watching and listening to Pat Carini chair a session, he began to question his own assumptions about descriptive process, noting that they were more flexible than he had anticipated. In a follow-up interview Brian explained that being "gentled" meant listening with his full attention, rather than listening only long enough to begin formulating his own contribution. When he served as co-faculty for Institute I he was
able to draw on his experiences of learning to chair from Pat Carini as he, in turn, modeled chairing for newcomers.

As part of his longer Recollection, Brian elected to talk about a session that caused him to rethink the affect the early death of his father had on his life. The purpose of a Recollection is significantly different from that of a therapy session. Framed in advance by a series of questions, it requires thoughtful preparation around a specific keyword. Recollections are deliberately set in groups of four or five participants and each person is allotted up to thirty minutes of uninterrupted time to speak. Trust, caring, and confidentiality are integral to the process.

That same year we did a Reflection, as well as a Recollection, on the word, “boundary.” During that Recollection it was the first time in a group, and probably the first time I’d really spoken about, and not just referred to, growing up without a father. How I had defined myself so much in my childhood, had really constricted myself, to the limits of my boundaries around that issue in my life. . . . Here I was in my thirties and had not spoken about it. . . . it helped others to know me. That touched a “space between” because when things like that happen, and they don’t have to be huge evocative things, they can just be a telling of it. But when those things do happen, they do evoke a lot in people and I think it touched others in other ways. They have ways of defining themselves, and sometimes limiting themselves. . . . I think it helps other people to be able to open their own limits.

When Brian realized that he could reframe how he had thought about his father’s death, he was able to speak comfortably for the first time about his experience of growing up without his father. He hoped that by telling his story the assumptions his listeners might have had about his reaction to the early death of his parent would be “broadened out” to include the assumptions we make about children in classrooms who may have had similar experiences. Reseeing ourselves, reviewing a personal story in a small group, allows the listeners to resee others. As Arielle said to him when he had finished talking,
It's a way of telling things that in another context people would say, "Oh well Brian, obviously..." and it doesn’t occur to anybody to say this. We take the story for what it is, from whence it comes, and for what it means for itself. And that’s what we do when we do descriptions of kids. We don’t put it in Freudian categories, or Jungian categories. It was your view of yourself and your story. And any of us would do it in our way. That is such a liberating thing! That’s something about the profundity of the total experience. The reason we come is personal and particular.

Carris’s Recollection: Learning in Community

Carris went through the undergraduate education program at the Prospect School when they were a certification site in the early eighties. Carris prefers living in the country, raising animals, spinning, weaving, sewing, gardening and cooking. She has also helped to design and build two houses.

In her masters thesis, Carris describes how she fostered relationships among her students and how they worked together to create a learning community. Her intermediate classrooms were structured for multiple activities and responsible choice making. The entries she included in her thesis from her classroom journal describe how she struggled to maintain an emergent curriculum during a period when the state required that all grade levels begin to align their instruction to the developing frameworks.

The Institute Carris chose to recollect was in 1996 when drawing as another way of describing was first introduced. The topic that summer was “Finding Political Ground: Self and Works in Public Space.” During the morning seminar we explored space and boundary, freedom and discipline, and limitation and expansion through common readings such as Albert Camus’ The Plague and Raymond Willimans’ The Long Revolution. Small literature discussion groups read Toni Morrison’s, Beloved, Salgado’s, Workers: An Archaeology of the Industrial Age, and Milan Kundera’s, The Art of the Novel, among others. Small literature groups read Toni Morrison’s Beloved, Salgado’s
Workers: An Archaeology of the Industrial Age, and Milan Kundera's The Art of the Novel.

Carris’s account reflects her interest in collaborative learning as an adult and the parallels between what she experiences in Summer Institute and what children experience in her classroom.

When people present a piece of their curriculum and how they did it, it’s always presented around questions of “What was I really doing?” that keeps it very open... I’ve learned a lot of curriculum here that way, and I think that needs to stay in the forefront. Although there are people here who work with education on a lot of levels, the question “What are the implications here?” keeps coming through and enriching our classroom lives when we go home. . . .

It happened last year, when we were doing description of a natural object in other mediums, a sort of a homework assignment. It was interesting in a couple of ways. You weren’t given the object so there was the time spent choosing the object. Choosing the object was complex in many ways. The number of natural objects I went through until I came up with one, in part because there were objects that interested me, and in part because they needed to be objects that would work in a medium that I could get a hold of here, as well as a medium that I wanted to work in.

It was a private, late-night construction and I don’t think that the glue was quite dry the next morning. It relates to how we give kids time or don’t give kids time to complete assignments. When I set out to make something it takes me much longer than I think it's going to, yet I listen to teachers crab all the time about the amount of time spent making something. And parents who say to their kids, “Why can’t you hurry up? Why can’t you structure your time differently?”

To realize by actually doing--without that experience I don't think I could understand that. I did not want to show these sub-standard results to anybody! There’s an acceptance of the work, because the vision inside is always so much more. I think that there’s more of an acceptance on the part of little kids that this approximation is good enough, and as adults we lose that. Maybe school has caused us to lose that, our confidence.

Then when we did share, the variety, the number of different mediums that people did use. So there’s a togetherness in this—that we were all doing it. There was an aloneness in actually doing it, and there was that togetherness in seeing it all in our small groups. A real togetherness with kids, a real chance to think about where I was pushing or being pushed myself--and that’s the big piece. In the process I used eyes and hands and there’s an alertness that comes from that, which is what I noticed when the kids were constructing last year, but I hadn’t put that piece together yet--
a kind of alertness that using the words didn't. At Prospect I knew that no matter how far short I fell, or how much I felt I couldn't do it, A, I was going do it, and B, it was going be all right.

In her Recollection, Carris drew on her own experience of taking on a complex art project to better understand what it might be like for her students to complete similar assignments, “a real chance to think about where I was pushing or being pushed myself.”

The setting for Carris’s account was the larger topic of “Self and Works in Public Space.” By working alone, keeping a journal of her process from the initial choice of a natural object to the completion of its representation, Carris was able to link her own efforts to those of the children in her classroom. Later, as she publicly presented her reflective journal and her work in her small group, she became more aware of the gap between what she envisioned and possible external standards by which it could be evaluated: “I did not want to show these sub-standard results to anybody!” In the community setting of the Institute, the emphasis was more on what she was thinking as she went about her work, and the atmosphere was one of expectation that she could thoughtfully articulate the process. As a result, she gained a new awareness of how much she forms knowledge through the hand by making things, as well as a renewed appreciation for that way of knowing.

Although she worked alone in her room, Carris experienced the collegiality of knowing that everyone else in the Institute was struggling with the same task. Like a child, she found herself curious about what others were learning, eager to see their finished products, and interested to hear about their efforts when they met. As she became aware of her own emerging standards for this project, she realized that what she had made was an approximation of what she had envisioned, “the vision inside is always
so much more.” Listening to the others in her group talk about their experiences with this assignment gave her new ways to think about knowledge formation through non-verbal description in “shared moments that transform.” Her preparation for this recollection prompted Carris to review notes from previous summers.

I was going back through notes last night and I actually have some comments from Pat in 1994—before I actually did this work—but she’s talking about describing as an art and a discipline. As far as a discipline, by doing this project we learned what it is to educate ourselves and others. In art there is a learning to work, remaking yourself, attempting to describe something until you feel that you get it right, and an acting out that gives you some sense of control. How central she felt to education that, “all reality must be learned by the effort to describe something.”

Carris is concerned that most schools don’t provide intermediate students long enough blocks of time to engage in the activity-based assignments that she has come to value. She joined a group of concerned parents working to establish an alternative charter school, but their large state legislature in the northeast was unable to agree on the regulations for charter schools. Eventually Carris resigned from her teaching position and then briefly took another. She is currently in an advanced degree program.

Summary

During the Summer Institute of 1983, we “described and contrasted the learning and thinking modes of individual children” articulating how instructional and classroom practices might be responsive to the various modes described. Adult recollections on experiences of thinking and learning were a parallel strand in this inquiry. In schools or during in-service programs for adults we often hear about “meeting children’s needs,” with the implication that there is something lacking, and that a program can be developed to match those needs. In the descriptive language of the Summer Institutes, the focus was shifted to close descriptions of classrooms, practice, and children in order to uncover
what was there—to build on children’s and teacher’s “temperamental and intellectual proclivities.”

Turning to Pat Carini’s notion of the Summer Institutes as a “grand experiment,” in listening to our individual recollections I thought about how the range of entry points for each summer’s set of focusing questions was her instructional response to our various modes of thinking and learning. In her annual application letter and syllabus, she notes her interest in exploring “The interplay of individual perspectives within a collective unit,” an interplay that was evidenced in the way that people spoke about their experiences attending the Institute. For example, Lisa said it was “like being given a window into or a reflection of what I valued.”

The common continuity for supporting their individual pursuits over time was provided by the structure of the descriptive processes: planning how to frame an inquiry, generating a focusing question, followed by collaborating in a disciplined, systematic manner within the parameters of that question. Carris touches on the role of the inquiry processes when she says, “we learned what it is to educate ourselves and others.”

Memory, imagination, and feeling often intermingle in a Recollection, and we as listeners responded. When Brian spoke about his unusual childhood, he understood that his speaking would affect his listeners. One of our readings in 1983, Max Scheler’s *The Nature of Sympathy*, provided a way of thinking about our work with one another and with children and their families. According to Carini (2001), he speaks of “love as a moral resource... not resorting to sentiment, or mouthing romantic rhetoric. He is speaking of love as action (p. 119). Participants listening attentively to one another engenders respect and care for one another that supports their actions. In Judy’s
recollection, we could hear that caring and knew it extended beyond the Summer Institutes into working relationships with her students, colleagues and the children she visits in their classrooms as she comes to supervise. For these individuals, the importance of living and working in a community where their interests and strengths were recognized and valued over time, has made a lasting and meaningful difference in their lives, and, most likely, in the lives of their students as well.
CONCLUSION

These occasions for carefully observing children, for documenting aspects of their work, and for reflecting on classroom events and student response, enable teachers not only to know their students well, but also to know their own teaching in a new way and to grow as a community of teachers engaged in sharing and developing knowledge.

Linda Darling-Hammond
*Exploring Values and Standards*, p, viii

Teachers from all over the country come together in a variety of settings during the summer to think about and discuss their work in classrooms. Lasting anywhere from a few days to several weeks, most of these summer schools, institutes, and workshop share a pedagogical focus such as improving instruction in writing or science. Some grant degrees or provide credit towards certification requirements. Some are deliberately situated outside of institutions.

The Summer Institutes, under the auspices of the Prospect Center, have much in common with these independent networks but differ in the professional range of their participants, the systematic focused nature of their inquiry, and, for Summer Institute II in particular, the unusual length of time a core group of people voluntarily comes together each summer to study. The larger setting for this research, The Prospect Archives and Center for Education and Research, is located in North Bennington and houses a board of directors, a national membership, three annual Institutes, publications, the Archive, Archive projects, and an annual November Conference. Participants and the teachers who regularly meet during the school year in small study groups, such as TLC in Philadelphia, or ETN in New York City are also a part of the larger framework of Prospect Center. The descriptive review processes used for collaborative inquiry during
the Summer Institutes have evolved out of a history of practices, ideas, and cultural traditions associated with Prospect Center. A growing list of publications by participants details the range of applications for this mode of inquiry.

A phenomenological research approach, with origins in philosophy, is well suited to portray participants of the Summer Institutes and their engagement with the epistemological questions that are at the center of their inquiry (Carini, 1975; Barritt et al, 1985; Denton, 1974; Jackson, 1996; Van Manen, 1990). It is able to provide the reader with a sense of what it is to experience the rich complexities, ambiguities, and multiple perspectives of the Institute’s review sessions. As a long-time participant of the Summer Institutes and member of Prospect Center’s teacher network, I would have found it impossible to place myself outside the group to conduct this research study. An approach that assumes a fundamental unity between the observer and the phenomenal world makes it suitable for the intimate nature of this study. By situating myself within the group as a researcher I can better recognize and depict the “sense of things substantive and bounded” as well as “the transitive and unbounded . . . to avoid reducing experience to the conceptual orders we impose upon it” (Jackson, p. 27).

Kenneth Bruffee (1999) asserts that in collaborative communities such as the Summer Institutes, no matter what their position or their size, that there is a reciprocal influence on the knowledge that is constructed, the meaning that is made by the participants, and the changes that occur in their knowledge over time (p. 267). Meeting in constantly shifting and reconstellated small groups within the larger entity of the Institute, that is associated with the Prospect Center, “each knowledge community is
enveloped by, immersed in, and involved with other larger communities” creating knowledge that is multi-dimensional and non-linear (Ibid.).

An ethnographic approach was used for the depiction of the larger cultural context of the Summer Institutes in which the descriptive review process nested (Clifford, 1990; Peshkin, 1988; Sanjek, 1990; Wolcott, 1990; Wolcott, 1994). While the review processes traditionally structure the formal discourse, their use has wider implications for the ways in which participants interact with one another outside the sessions. Ethnographic description helps to make the various interactions of participants in the smaller inquiry sessions as well as the cultural traditions and structures of the Institute as a whole “concretely comprehensible” (Clifford, 1990, p. 62). The voluntary and caring nature of this group is multi-faceted and continues to evolve out of the collaborative work and study of participants living together in a setting apart from their schools and families. Ethnographic interviews and conversations were helpful in depicting what they see as the purpose of the Institute and how they view themselves as participants, evidenced in their longer accounts in Chapter Eight.

A phenomenological and ethnographic portrayal is not analysis in ideological and political terms. The analytical, distancing, and objectifying language of critical theory is not suitable for capturing the day-to-day intimacy of the lived experience of this small group of twenty-five participants. In his book, Collaborative Circles: Friendship Dynamics & Creative Work, Michael Farrell (2001) applies social psychology to analyze the tensions, hierarchies, and negotiations that characterize the evolving configurations of groups that formed around selected individuals such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. While a similar analysis could be applied to the Summer Institute group, it
would not address my purpose, which is to assist the reader in understanding what it means, from the point of view of a participant, to experience the collaborative circles of Prospect Center’s Summer Institutes.

Critical questions relating to race, gender, and socio-economic issues raised by educational theorists, such as Landen Beyer, Michael Apple, and Henry Giroux, are also central to the work of Summer Institute. For example Beyer and Apple (1988) address the increasing influence of high stakes tests on instruction by noting that we should first ask, “whose knowledge it is, who selected it, and why (italics in text) it is organized and taught in this particular way, to this particular group” (p. 342). Similar queries framed the 1999 Summer Institute: Whose knowledge and authority counts when educational decisions are made about children? Whose knowledge and authority counts in setting educational priorities and policy? What is at stake in the “standards” and testing issues?

In using phenomenological and ethnographic approaches to portray the lived experience of this group as they collaborate to explore the topics within their Institute’s framing questions, I address the complexity of grappling with these critical educational issues. Just as during the Institute these large questions are grounded in the lived experience of particular classrooms and in the descriptions of particular individuals and their works, this dissertation questions institutional assumptions about teacher knowledge and grounds them descriptions of particular Institute sessions and transcribed narratives. During the Institute participants place wide ranging readings from authors such as Raymond Williams, Toni Morrison, Adrienne Rich, and Alfred North Whitehead alongside child studies and reviews, deepening their knowledge. From that collaboratively constructed knowledge they derive the confidence to publicly take an
active and questioning stance. This dissertation is a recognition and acknowledgement of the importance and the difficulty of sustaining that work.

Similarly, teacher development programs that incorporate a descriptive stance and encourage students to frame critical questions for research projects also address institutional assumptions about teacher knowledge (Hanhan, 1988). Cecelia Traugh (2002) in establishing a new educational program for urban teachers at Long Island University notes that "Professors who have been educated to know how to defend the answers they believe are right and true do not always take to the idea of process and a collaborative quest" (p. 2).

The dissertation fits within the context of other studies pertaining to teacher development within collaborative groups, such as Eleanor Duckworth's account of the Experienced Teacher Program (Duckworth, 1997; Gallas 1998; Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996; Pennell & Firestone, 1996; Sunstein, 1994). Other studies, such as by Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle's (1993) book Inside/Outside, address descriptive inquiry in particular, (Andrias et al, 1992; Gallas 1998; Hanhan, 1988; Himley, 1991; Himley, 2000; Howard, 1989; Traugh, 2000).

Throughout my research I drew on Lieberman and Grolnick's (1996) extensive ethnographic study of teacher networks in which they interviewed teachers and collected data from sixteen educational reform groups involved with educational change and alternative forms of teacher and school development. Although though each group was unique they looked across all the networks for ways in which they were organized and brought participants together. In their findings they noted that most groups had the following in common: (1) collaborative study that incorporates multiple perspectives; (2)
a cooperative governing structure; (3) challenging agendas; (4) generalized knowledge along with context-specific knowledge; (5) a belief in the capacity of all children to learn; (6) a commitment to enact those values in schools.

Most of these attributes also pertain to Summer Institute II; however, in this dissertation they are situated and particularized within the three settings of Summer Institutes I and II and the annual November Conference. The portrayals of participants' experiences of the Institute are connected by the common thread of the various descriptive review processes. Following a few individuals as they interact in multiple settings over time helps the reader to understand the range of what it means, personally as well as professionally, to be part of a cooperative study group.

The complex range of reciprocal influences that characterize the Institutes can be clustered into three groups under the headings of: taking a descriptive stance; caring and collegiality; and action.

Taking a Descriptive Stance

While Prospect Center's Summer Institute and November Conference share many of the qualities that characterize the teacher networks from the Lieberman and Grolnick study, there are certain features and ways of working that distinguish them. Perhaps the most striking feature is Prospect Center's strong commitment to taking a descriptive rather than an evaluative stance in regard to children, adolescents, and teachers.

At the center of progressive teacher networks, including Prospect Center, is the question, "What does it mean to educate?" However, over the years the Summer Institute has particularized the question to "What does it mean to educate a person?" and pairs it with a second question, "What does a school or classroom have to be in order that each
child be recognized and heard?” Working collaboratively, participants at the Summer Institute on Descriptive Inquiry use the review processes for guided observation and disciplined description of children and their works, teaching, and issues of practice.

Most teacher networks committed to transforming schools are mainly concerned with evaluating both students and teachers and employ a variety of protocols that suit that aim. Many participants who attend the Summer Institutes, especially those from large urban centers, are familiar with a variety of evaluative protocols such as the Tuning Protocol and the Collaborative Assessment Conference (C.A.C.) used by members of the Coalition for Essential Schools, and Looking Together at Student Work (L.S.W.) associated with Project Zero. When newcomers first attend the Institute sessions, they struggle with the differences between an evaluative and a descriptive stance. However, in Chapter Two we saw how review processes create an accessible structure that supports disciplined description for newcomers as well as experienced practitioners. Their ability to describe increased over a remarkably short time.

According to the letter that was sent to participants enrolled in the 1997 Summer Institute I, the overall aim of the Institute was to “explore the many ways in which children express their ideas of the world through activities, words and works, and to consider the implications of this understanding for classroom practice, curriculum, school policy and assessment.” Rather than critique a teacher on the quality of an assignment or assess a child on whether or not the work meets a certain standard, the Summer Institute shifts the focus to what sustains a child’s interest and involvement. The larger question that frames their inquiry is, “What of importance to children and their education is made
visible through their works?" Their descriptive stance is clearly outlined in the application form for the Institutes.

The assemblage of ideas that surround these processes and the Center’s [teaching] practice is centered on the nature of the person and personal meaning, on the formation of knowledge, and taken in the broadest sense, on the nature of thinking and memory. Both in practice, and in the processes emergent from practice, the intention is to grasp the person’s meaning as it is expressed in the person’s interests and in his [sic] projects in the world: that is through body and gesture, through play and fantasy, through representation in drawing, speech, construction, through thinking and the formation of knowledge, through imagination, and through willed action. This intention is grounded in reflection on the larger themes of meaning as these are broadly and deeply preserved and expressed in the memories and lives and works of all persons.

Descriptive inquiry employs an investigatory, non-judgmental stance where comments refer to the “thing in itself” and external factors are temporarily set aside during a review. Using Archive files from one child’s nine year school experience, such as Sean’s in Chapter Two, provides a meaningful context for the extended practice that is necessary before participants feel comfortable with this approach. More experienced participants, as we see in Chapter Four, continue their ongoing inquiry around description and interpretation, pairing the oral description of a feather with an exercise in drawing.

Individuals who attend Institute II credit the use of descriptive processes with helping to frame inquiries that allow them to think about pedagogical issues, children, and children’s works in ways that they would be unable to do on their own. They become practiced observers with a strong interest in how children make meaning by seeking to identify what children can accomplish, along with what they find difficult. Noting each child’s capacity for understanding as evidenced in their works, these teachers work to develop appropriate and inviting activities that meet the needs of all their students.
Examined practice is supported by participation in Descriptive Reviews, such as the one described in Chapter Eight of Josh. To enhance the quality of the discussion, the presenter and the chairperson work closely together to plan a session. For example in Chapter Eight, we saw how the chair and presenter prepared for the Descriptive Review of Josh. They deliberately selected projects that arose out of open-ended assignments that would help participants see how student-generated work made Josh's thinking, inclinations, and interests more accessible to the teacher. After presenting detailed descriptions of a child, followed by a discussion, teachers receive a list of recommendations. In different review process, a Descriptive Review of Practice, the teacher frames an inquiry about her work and develops a focusing question. A guided description of the nature of her work and its setting structures her presentation, which is then followed by recommendations. The assumption underlying both processes is that teachers are knowledgeable, realize their strengths, and can acknowledge where they would like support. Participants often revisit the notes from their Reviews of Practice long after the event. Judy says she keeps the packet from her Review of Practice on her bedside table and where it is easily available for rereading when she encounters difficulties at work.

During a period when words like "standards" and "accountability" are shaping national education policy, legislating that no child shall be left behind, Prospect Center continues to maintain its descriptive stance, grounded in the particular. We see in Chapter Two how newcomers during Summer Institute I look for and identify a child's standards as they are evidenced in particular pieces within a body of work over time. It is possible to observe standards arise out of a group of children in a classroom as they work
closely together throughout the year. For example, in Sean’s school records teachers noted how his innovative use of artistic mediums was taken up and then extended by other students in the class, thereby enriching the work of everyone. The standards of each of his teachers were evident in their weekly reflective journals where participants could read about how they provisioned their classrooms and interacted with the children in their classrooms during instructional, as well as, choice times.

Extending their commitment to inquiry to their school sites, participants “keep the child at the center of their work” by presenting full portraits of children during special education planning meetings. Deliberately focusing their attention on children’s strengths, they situate the detailed descriptions of their students and their works within the particular contexts of their classrooms. Their accounts can easily be understood by colleagues as well as by family members and provide a balance to the lists of standardized test scores that highlight deficiencies.

Caring and Collegiality

In her book, *The Schoolhome*, Jane Martin (1992) writes about how a caring, supportive, and inviting setting provides a space where people of all ages can comfortably take intellectual risks as they pursue their interests. Children who come from unpredictable, and sometimes tumultuous, circumstances in their families often find solace in the continuity of school. Teachers who come to Summer Institute from their demanding, unpredictable, and sometimes demoralizing, work in schools find hope in the continuity of the Institute and recognition in the warm and welcoming atmosphere. Although they come to address the difficult issues of teaching, they anticipate that their
work together will generate possibilities for thinking about their students and their practice.

Living and working together in the Institute's residential setting instills certain values. But it is not the physical location that matters, so much as a sense of what some participants refer to as "home," a place where they are recognized and appreciated as knowledgeable persons. During one of our interviews Judy remarked that, "This is not so much a place as a state of mind." She went on to talk about how the respect and attentiveness engendered during the formal sessions spill over into the day-to-day interactions of the participants. Libby said, "I feel more comfortable here than anywhere else." At the Institute she can talk freely about her deep interest in the natural world and in philosophy and not be "considered a show-off." Judy noted that the pace of life at the Institute promotes ongoing leisurely conversations that expand beyond the time frame of two weeks into the school year. They "allow us to have connections with ideas, people, and works over time and space." Brian spoke for many when he said:

I knew right from the beginning, well almost right from the beginning anyway, that Prospect was home... It's being with people that's so important. It made me feel that what I had to offer was valued. That's a rare experience for any person I think, too rare.

Prospect Center's collaborative processes provide a framework for inquiry that acknowledges and supports pluralism. Participants value the rich mixture of viewpoints that results from the diverse range of race, gender, age, and professional levels of the educators who attend. The formal processes create a space for where differences are acknowledged and respected. Defining Summer Institute II as a democratic community, one participant remarked that, "there is no need here to parade your qualifications."

Patricia Carini often speaks of "human capacity--widely distributed," as an overarching
theme that runs throughout Prospect Center’s Institutes. Her interest has been to particularize what that capacity means for each person, and then more broadly, to show how working together on a collaborative endeavor provides an opportunity to build on their differences.

A Voluntary Cooperative

Since it is a study group, the Institute is dependent on the ongoing voluntary collaboration of individuals for both the content and the day-to-day functioning. Their efforts limit the cost of attending the Institute to mostly room and board, making it more affordable for teachers. Possibilities for volunteering during the Institute itself range from lunch preparation to chairing a session. The faculty who teach Summer Institute I for newcomers also volunteer, but can rejoin Institute II the second week tuition free. The most demanding role is that of director. The fact that this is also an unpaid position is unusual and is indicative of the commitment that individuals make to support the larger entity of Prospect Center.

While other summer institutes offer workshops or classes around specific topics for credit, Summer Institute II, as a cooperative study group, is not affiliated with a university or college. It is possible, however, for individuals to arrange college or university credit for an independent study during the Institute, or they can receive professional development credits for their attendance.

Formal and informal classroom research projects around specific children, curriculum, along with chaired discussions of issues of practice form a central part of the Institute. During the Summer Institute of 1999, a total of twenty-seven afternoon and evening small group sessions were offered by individuals. When there are so many
choices, individual experiences of the Institute can vary greatly. We saw in Chapter Three that participants take interest in one another’s thoughts and commitments. That care for one another is evident in the way that they set aside time the end of the Institute in order to review their notes and to trace their personal threads of interest and then orally reflect on their time together. Out of this session comes the planning for the next summer’s Institute. Volunteers gather mid-year to incorporate additional suggestions from letters and e-mails, establish the major focus and suggested reading list, duplicate applications, and distributed them.

Teachers supporting one another as classroom researchers and as colleagues deserves more recognition, and should continue to be documented in a profession often noted for its top-down influence on school restructuring, curriculum development and teacher development (Katz, Noddings & Strike, 1999). As Lieberman and Grolnick (1996) note in their study, it is unfortunate that teachers need to turn to networks outside their schools and districts in order to address issues, and acquire skills which they believe are essential to their work, stating that these “problematic and powerful third spaces are becoming an important force for reform in American education” (pp. 44 - 45).

Depth of Inquiry

The participants of this study group care deeply about ideas and how those ideas are enacted in their lives. The reading list for the Institute continues to be an important source of ideas for participants, enhancing the depth of their inquiry. Influenced by Patricia Carini’s early Major Seminars and her interest in phenomenology, participants have come to regard teaching as a mode of being rather than as a series of actions or a set of functions. As a result they have tended to turn to sources other than educational
theorists for thinking about their work. Novels and poems, while pointing to existence, also embody existence in literary forms. Essays by Alfred North Whitehead, Raymond Williams, Barry Lopez, Milan Kundera, and Isaiah Berlin have served to "explicate the various modalities of the lived-world" (Denton, 1974, p. 11). The juxtaposition of readings with Descriptive Reviews of children, and children's works fosters connectedness by engaging the imagination and memory "to envision education in its widest possible context" (Troutner, 1974, p. 41).

Since the beginning of the Institute the assigned common readings have provided additional perspectives on the inquiry focus for the summer. [See Appendices C and D] For example, the question, "What is the purpose of taking a descriptive stance?" is taken up each year and addressed in ways that are particular to the topic of the Institute. Temporarily setting aside previous knowledge of an natural object in order to look closely and describe becomes an exercise in disciplined description. Applying the ideas of Whitehead to an exploration of the reciprocity between verbal and non-verbal description as we saw in Chapter Four, raised new questions about the relationship between description and inquiry. Engaging in this and other exercises of disciplined description over several summers has helped participants to maintain an awareness our natural tendency to make assumptions and judgments.

Because participants come from diverse geographical regions and represent a range of professional levels, the inquiry sessions at the Institute create a "public space" where new ideas and themes can be explored freed from the constraints of familiar settings, assumptions and expectations. Participants encourage and support one another as they take on challenging new roles that they might not have the opportunity try in.
other settings. One can to chair, Major Seminars, the second week’s literature discussion, or teach Institute I. The resulting experience can broaden their possibilities for further personal and professional action.

Authority and Knowledge

Questions relating to epistemology have been central to the Institutes since their inception. Knowledge is seen as ongoing, evolving, and transformative, “knowledge in the making.” They reject the notion of “knowledge as separate from the knower” and prefer instead to view “knowledge making as a pedagogic act” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 272). Experienced participants spoke of the excitement of pursuing questions that arose out of their investigations, akin to. Whitehead’s “adventures of ideas.”

People attending Institute II recognize and support one another as knowledgeable persons as they make room for their differences. The stories that percolate through their interactions in the common territory of readings, public spaces, sessions, and meals embody ideas as well as ideals.

Action

Because it is a study group, participants generate the topics for the Institute. Although they choose to attend knowing that they will be addressing difficult educational issues, they also gain new insight and receive support to reframe conflicts and demands in ways that facilitate ways in which they can take positive action. When asked what drew them to return each summer, most participants talked about how much they looked forward to spending time with others who shared their progressive social and educational aims and were interested in exploring ideas.
Lieberman and Grolnick (1996) note what they term "this dialectic, between the larger meaning of the network's goals and the concrete vitality of its daily activities, that grounds its purpose and ennobles its practice" (p. 29). Child studies, teacher research sessions, and readings enlarge and affirm participants' personal and professional knowledge, and contribute to the collective knowledge of the group over time. Carrying with them the ideas and images from their summer investigations, participants return to their personal work settings. In turn, the observations and questions generated in their classrooms provide the ongoing content for the Institute. Quoting Donald Schon, Lieberman and Grolnick describe how "collaborative relationships build trust, essential to the development of ideas, and ideas build network interest and participation as they themselves are transformed by the participants and fed back into the network" (Ibid., p. 12)

For example, Danielle's paper depicting the mathematical investigations of her students arose out of the conversations and review process sessions from previous Institutes about this topic. During her afternoon session the description of her paper gave her new insights for further refining her classroom portrayal. If her paper is published, it will add to the larger discussion about children's mathematical knowledge. By tentatively selecting the general research topic for the following summer during the last session, participants are able to leave the Institute with a specific focus for observation and documentation in their classrooms. Knowing that there will be a forum for their thoughts and observations gives meaning and a sense of purpose to their investigations.

In this present time of financial uncertainty and political maneuvering, public schools and social support systems for families and their children are increasingly at risk.
Recently passed legislation pertaining to standardized testing will determine who shall be promoted and shall not. In most states the viability of schools is now linked to test scores that will determine their future funding. As a result, professional development is offered in one-size-fits-all workshops and classroom practice is rarely addressed in lasting or meaningful ways.

It is not surprising that participants of the Summer Institute who work in large urban school systems find little administrative support for looking at children in depth. Instead, they are expected to unquestioningly implement mandated curriculums linked to national and state frameworks and then administer high stakes tests. Because their voices are rarely acknowledged and often mistrusted, many increasing numbers of teachers are beginning to feel hopeless and demoralized (Meier, 2002).

Individuals who regularly attend the Summer Institutes are able to draw on their own and one another's knowledge in ways that affirm and support teacher autonomy. Many participants continue to meet regularly in local study groups, while others can only attend Prospect Center's Annual November Conferences. Their ongoing collaboration fosters confidence in their ability to speak out publicly. For example, during the nineteen-eighties, much as it is occurring now, national reports and studies were quite critical as they questioned teacher competency. Teachers' viewpoints were not represented or dismissed.

In response to these national reports, a core group of participants of Summer Institute developed a list of questions about the nature of teaching, solicited written responses from teachers in the Prospect Center network, and eventually publishing the results of their inquiry in the form of a monograph (Traugh, 1986). Taking the position...
that teaching is an art, they selected stories and anecdotes that portrayed many possible ways of knowing for both children and teachers, including as well, a chapter on the conditions that undermine good schools and teaching practice. Through their collaborative endeavors, Institute participants acquire the knowledge and confidence to speak out with authority about their work.

During the 1998 and 1999 Summer Institutes participants returned to readings by Raymond Williams and Isaiah Berlin to help in framing inquiries that would grounded in an historical perspective that acknowledged competing values. Using the process of Close Reading, the Major Seminar sessions dealt with issues around knowledge, authority, and action. Individuals continued to address these same topics during the afternoon sessions using descriptive a variety of review processes to situate these issues in particular school and community settings. For example, Lisa requested an afternoon session to describe a series of her parent newsletters in order to look at issues of parent accessibility and communication.

Drawing on their readings and strands of inquiry, particularly their periodic revisiting of Whitehead, participants view themselves as active knowers, evolving and changing. They consider description as a way of knowing, recognize one another as having knowledge in practice, and perceive their workplaces as “schools in the making.” Each summer they are drawn to the “adventures of ideas,” creating a depth of serious inquiry that as a study group, they make possible for one another. Based on my experience in five other teacher networks, two of which were included in the Lieberman and Grolnick study, the conjunction of disciplined descriptive inquiry processes to address substantive content over an unusually long period of time, housed in a caring,
democratic community distinguishes Prospect Center’s Summer Institute from various other teacher network gatherings and institutes.

By taking the time to look, to describe, and to inquire with colleagues for over twenty-five years they have become an authoritative community of interdependent knowledgeable peers (Bruffee, 1999, p. 153). They encourage one another to maintain a positive focus by “urging that problems be framed as questions and by working to prevent a narrowing view of human possibility” (Traugh, 2000, p. 183). For this voluntary teacher network study group, inquiry grounded in description has become a way of perceiving the world, as well as a way of learning, across both the personal and the professional life span.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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APPENDICES
Appendix A

IRB Letter

UNIVERSITY OF NEW HAMPSHIRE

Office of Sponsored Research
Service Building
51 College Road
Durham, New Hampshire 03824-3585
(603) 862-3564 Fax

May 06, 1997

Ms. Karen Woolf
253 Pickpocket Road
Brentwood, NH 03833

IRB Protocol #1851 - Collaborative Teacher Inquiry...

Dear Ms. Woolf:

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research has reviewed the protocol for your project as Exempt as described in Federal Regulations 45 CFR 46, Subsection 46.101(b)(2). Approval is granted to conduct the project as described in your protocol. If you decide to make any changes in your protocol, you must submit the requested changes to the IRB for review and approval prior to any data collection from human subjects.

The protection of human subjects is an ongoing process for which you hold primary responsibility. In receiving IRB approval for your protocol, you agree to conduct the project in accordance with the ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of human subjects in research, as described in the enclosed "The Belmont Report." Additional information about other pertinent Federal and university policies, guidelines, and procedures is available in the UNH Office of Sponsored Research.

There is no obligation for you to provide a report to the IRB upon project completion unless you experience any unusual or unanticipated results with regard to the participation of human subjects. Please report these promptly to this office.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact Kara Eddy, Regulatory Compliance Officer (for the IRB), at 862-2003. Please refer to the IRB # above in all future correspondence related to this project. We wish you success with the research.

Sincerely,

Kathryn B. Cataneo

Kathryn B. Cataneo, Executive Director
Office of Sponsored Research
(for the IRB)

KBC: ke

Enclosure

cc: Tom Schram
Appendix B

Institute Themes and Topics

1968 Began with 6 week Institutes: Children were involved. Discussions around notions of Open Corridors and Open Classroom, Schools Without Walls

1969 Teacher Ed Program started, ways of keeping in touch with public schools (Second SI)

1970 Summer Institute

1972 North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation formed

1973-1974 Rockefeller grant, looked to consolidation.(Third and Fourth SI’s)
   “A Teacher Center for teacher centers”: Workshop Center in NYC sent advisors, EDC, Patterson NJ, Ithaca and Philadelphia; alternatives to testing, documentation.
   “Considerations of the Lifespan;”
   making thoroughness available to teachers with Staff Review of the Child as its vehicle.
   Contrasting individualized instruction and how children move quickly through materials, and the notion of looking at how individuals learn.
   ETS Reading Study, focus on language;
   “Experimental Schools Program:” grants given in California and Minneapolis; staff and adjunct workshops

1975 Human Development: Considerations of the Lifespan (Fifth SI)
   Strand of Documentation
   Pat’s monograph came out (was initially a Rockefeller Grant proposal): Observation and Description: An Alternative Methodology for the Investigation of Human Phenomena
   ETS Reading Study,
   New York State Five Year Study (evaluation of experimental Pre-K program)

1976 Formalized ways of people returning (Sixth SI)
   Considerations of the Lifespan 8/1-8/14
   Some participants brought own work for the first time 7/5-7/24
   Prospect beginning to collect and organize children’s work (Sean, Frankie, Eli)
   Clay as a medium (initial work around this medium began in the ‘60’s)
   Ways of talking about curriculum through mediums
   The Processes and the Philosophical Perspective
   “The Evolution of a Process: Reflective Conversation on the Child and the Medium,” written by Pat and Beth Albery
   Notions of repetition, contrasts and similarities, connecting patterns in works to other works; processes meant to deepen observation while enlivening perception

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1977 Seventh Summer Institute
ETS Reading Study, NY State study
Practicum in Field-based research: interest in teachers on sabbatical coming to
Prospect 7/5-7/27
Children as readers and draw-ers 7/10-7/20
Considerations of the Lifespan 7/31-8/17

1978 The Child as Thinker (located at The Mill: Eighth SI)
First year of a thematic approach
Systematic use of children’s work: writings of (Carley), (Misha), and (Evan)
Children’s writing
Storytelling: themes of “House” and “Journey”
Readings: Taran Wanderer, Little House books
discussions of memory and quest
*Reflections* on: writing, thinking, power and conflict
NY and ETS studies continue, integration of ETS data
[Note Karen’s school had weekend residencies in November and early May in 1978]

1979 Choice and Education of the Person (Formal beginnings of Institute II, 7/8-7/25,
(located at The Mill, Ninth SI): to provide participants experience of processes for
describing and understanding the child’s interests and mode of working as a basis for
educational choices and decisions.
Morning Seminars:
* Choice and The Educability of the Child: Documentary accounts of (Alex)
and (Virgina); Choice and Turning Points in the Lifespan
* The Emergent Curriculum: Reflections on Power and Conflict; Descriptions
of suns; Integration of the motifs and curricular implications
* Patterns of Choice: Preferred Mediums of Expression, Recurrent Motifs and
Choice; Implications of Choice and Choosing for School Applicability and
Extension of Processes
Changes in Society and Childhood;
Seminar: Process of Charting (7/24/79)
discussions of choice, medium, and motif
Media included storytelling, painting, drawing, TV, and writing (To make
something embedded in the person separate enough so you can see it)
*Reflections* : choice, teaching, music, landscape, light, car, tease, power,
conflict, sides, survivor, flight, boundary, humor, memory
[1980-1983 characterized by Pat as period of “high individual productivity”]

1980: Observing, Memory, and the Formation of Knowledge (Tenth SI)
philosophical pieces
Several participants in Master Degree programs
Observation and Perspectives of Childhood using (Alex) and (Alva)
Documentation of Adults as Learners (personal styles, themes, etc.) pp. 26-29
[Karen was not there that summer—need a copy of Noyes documentation, notes, etc.]
1981 *The Child as Speaker* (Eleventh SI)

Separation between Institute I and Institute II

Seminars: The growth of language, personal recollection of ourselves as speakers

*Barfield (Speaker's Meaning): historical nature of language, figurative origin, and polarity of expressions and communication*

*The Origins of Language in Infancy and Early Childhood, Nemerov (“On Poetry and Painting, With a Thought of Music”)*

*The Experience of Speaking: Recollection of ourselves as speakers*

*Gesture, Image, Symbol: Reflection on “symbol,” an exploration of the relationship of word to gesture and image, Nemerov (Figures of Thought, “Speaking Silence”) exercise with May Swensen’s poem, “The Centaur” also “Wild Horse”*

*Poetry, Language, Thought, specifically Heidegger’s essay on language*

*Language and the Classroom: “natural” language: conversing, storytelling, discussion, etc. When language occurs and when it is most significant for the learning process.*


Issues Reviews: Racism; Gifted and Talented Programs

Journal writing: role of Anne Martin as writing advisor (also for thesis completions)

Karen’s storm experience alone in Agard

Karen’s journal entries around learning Norwegian, comparisons of translations of the same Swedish poems by three American authors. My translation, to grapple with the same language and meaning issues myself, of a chapter in a book by Sigurd Hoel told in first person by five year old boy

Documentation Laboratory:

*the notion of polarities and their function in integrating data*

*Pat’s observation of Peggy Perlmutter’s Kindergarten Class and interview with Peggy*

Collaborative study groups

Review of Alice’s journal

*Reflections* racism, sound, journal, words, speaker, silence, will

[Transition year for Prospect School, give up Mill, move to Bleau House, Board members others intervene for reorganization, Pat takes sabbatical, returns in late spring from UND in time for Twelfth Summer Institute]

1982 *Language, Memory and the Arts* (Twelfth SI)

*School Lives of Children* published

*Inquiry into Meaning* published

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Language and memory themes

Common Readings: Heller (Disinherited Mind), Raymond Williams (Keywords), Olney (Metaphors of the Self), Barfield (Saving the Appearances) Emphasis on the achievement of subjectivity as the ultimate attainment of mythic consciousness, and shift from mythic consciousness to an historical consciousness. Language and its place in accomplishing these attainments and interpretations.

Morning Seminars:
* Language development (contrasting drawing: gesture/line, with music: breath/cadence, sounds/silence)
* Play: as first shaper of metaphor, and personal motifs (using words, images, rhythm, composition, transformations--) Ratchford (The Bronte’s Web of Childhood)
* An education that starts with the idea of consciousness (as disclosed through memory, will, feeling and imagination) rather than intelligence
* Interpretive power of language in shaping how we view diversity (understanding of intelligence, individual, sexual and racial differences) a child’s entry to reading of the growth of self-awareness through classroom conversation, teaching children to write

Documentation Laboratory:
* documentation as a method, and documenting as an alternative to testing
* discussed in depth Charting, integration of data, and archiving classroom products; issues conversations: testing, Gould (The Mismeasure of Man), test rational and construction, children’s responses to the threat of nuclear war (Brenda Engel), value of diversity, artwork of Elly Parker.

[Note: Karen in China for first week]

1983 Community and the Individual: The Interplay of Interests (Thirteenth SI)

Morning Seminars:
* Consciousness, Myth and Collective Meaning;
* Synaesthesia, Contagion, and the Participatory Consciousness;
* Family Memory, Tradition, and Our Access to Others;
* A Study of Emergent Perspective: Era, Heritage, Family;
* Individual Perspective: Recurrent Metaphors, Mediums of Expression;
* Friends, Friendship and Intimacy, Describing the Classroom Community; * Classroom Implications: Interest, Self-Interest, and Communal Effort;
* Boundary and Freedom/ Order and Choice;
* Boundary, Choice and Responsibility: Classroom Implications

Reading: Fussell (The Great War and Modern Memory)

Valuing diversity
reworking process Staff Review of a Child
new processes evolve: Staff Review of a Classroom, Child’s Impulse to Value, Emergent Perspective (memory and shaping images from childhood; recurrence and choice)
Alice Seletsky’s Curriculum Review on values in Social Studies
autobiography as a source of knowledge: Joyce (Portrait of the Artist, study)
Small Group Topics: Adolescence, Friends/Friendships, Death/Loss, Emblems
Pat’s seminar on adolescence (8/11/83)
“The Reports”
Testing (Debbie Meier: *Why Reading Tests Don’t Test Reading*)
Anne Martin’s Journal group
Building on children’s strengths as an opposing stance to excellence
Issues Conversations: racism and segregation; bilingualism; tracking; children’s
responses to the threat of war (Brenda Engel); a vocabulary for peace; and
testing
How standards arise, and how differ from imposed standards
*Reflections* play, perspective, orientation, future, names, naming; values,
valuing, ties, bind; care, caring; influence, adolescence

1983 October Conference:
Lillian Weber [my school staff attends, turns out my principal was one of Lillian’s
students]
* Loss of major funding

[1984-1986 characterized by Pat as period of high cooperative productivity]

1984 Community and Individual (continued) (Fourteenth SI)
Morning Seminar:
* Philosophy: Whitehead (*Modes of Thought*: Lecture 2, “Expression”)  
* The Subjective and Reduced Views of the Person
* Child Studies: Ways of Being
* Gesture: Modes of Expression and Engagement
* Gesture continued: Whitehead, Merleau-Ponty
* Gesture and “Works”: rhythm, stance, perspective, spatiality, and energy
* Interwoven Lives: Friendships Exploration of the drawing power of
  value as that is made visible through friendships.
* Recollections. The complementarity of emotional intensity, rhythm,
  perspective and inflection as factors in friendships, and implications
  for classroom work
* The Study of Gesture: An Exercise. Photographs of (Gordon) and (Gert)
  a new process
* Community and the Individual: The Interplay of Interests: The notion of
  subjectivity, importance of diversity, and novelty as it relates to the
  common ground.
* Small Group topics: looking at works of (Leo), (Emma), and (Holly)
  -Process and Practice: Emergent perspective and the child’s impulse
to value
  -Emergent Curriculum
Read the “Reports,” discussed political and educational implications and made plans for response (Teachers’ Voices conceived)
Planned for panel presentation at North Dakota Study Group
Adolescence extended to conceptualization of a high school
Tensions around divergent needs, participants invited to make speeches, consult
Considered the questions and the content at the heart of history and science
Interest Groups: Computers; Journals; Process and Practice: the “Reports”

1984 Fall Conference: reflection on “common”, The “Reports,” subjectivity, advocacy

1985 “Works” and Friendship: Individual Perspectives and Interwoven Lives (Fifteenth SI)
Teachers’ Voices (editing)

First Week: Science Symposium with Ted Chittendon, Hu Dyasi, Eleanor Duckworth, Lillian Weber, Cecelia Houghton
* Questions
  What constitutes the scientific body of knowledge? What pieces are most critical? What kinds of language are used in science? The dual nature of language with respect to the stimulation and constriction of experience and the different types of language used for different experiences. What are entry points into science? How is nature manipulated to in order to answer a research question? What is the relationship between science and the humanities? The balance between social trust and skepticism necessary in a communal enterprise such as science.

Morning Seminar:
* the issue of what we understand science to be and what the consequences have been of the separation of science from nature which started with Newton (Hugh Dyasi)
* presentations by E. Duckworth, H. Dyasi and P. Carini, followed by responses from participants
* small group discussions on “Science as a Body of Knowledge”
* Science Symposium: panel (Pat, Ted, Eleanor, Hubert, Cecelia H. and Lillian) and participants discuss issues around practice. Common threads to be addressed:
  Science as a body of knowledge
  Science as knowledge and science as method
  The knower shaping knowledge
* Plans for teaching science at CPE II (Neil)

Philosophy: Whitehead, Nozick (Philosophical Explanations)
Change in children’s works over time (Paul) and (Iris)
Adolescent study group continues
Tracing threads of interest (extending autobiographical studies)
Photographic study of participants’ photos
Describing adult works
Philosophy study group: Whitehead and Nozick
Issue of adequate time for communication, e.g. archive scholars
Pat notes contrast between 3 weeks at UND, intense child studies and Summer Institute. Perhaps took on too much this Institute.
*Reflections* common ground
[Note: Karen in Israel that summer]

1986 Reflections on “Works”: Friendship and the Formation of Knowledge in Childhood and Adulthood (Sixteenth SI)

Morning Seminar:
* Insights into friendship and the construction of social worlds
* the formation of knowledge with special emphasis on science and art
* the meaning of continuity and change in adult works (Lynne Strieb and Mike Knutson)
* the meaning of continuity and change in children’s “works.”(Iris) and (Paul)
* Philosophy: Scheler (The Nature of Sympathy: Part 1, I and XI; Part 2, I, II,)
* Forming Knowledge or Ways of Thinking About Thinking
* Studies of friendships through photographs of (Gert) and (Phyllis)
*film as a medium: Julia. Reading: Bridge to Terabithia. Both used to study friendship
Common Readings: Whitehead (Adventures of Ideas: “Adventure”), Whitehead (Modes of Thought: “Lecture II” and “Lecture IV”) Purpose: understanding some of the tensions between bodies of knowledge and forming knowledge; between the clarity of the boundary circumscribing received knowledge and the vaguer and wider contexts of understanding embraced in the activity of discovery; between process (potential) and products (achievements).
*Barbara McClintock’s work related to philosophy of Whitehead (talk by Cecelia)

Michael Armstrong (Closely Observed Children) visits from Bread Loaf
Adolescence study group continues around friendships and adolescent writing
Critiquing, editing adult writing
Exploring expressive materials common in children’s work
drawing arches
Coles (The Moral Life of Children)
Threads of Interest in Science and Art
Ted Chittendon’s science project grant: Descriptions of whole class discussions
Issues Conversations: What is the role of the arts in education? What are some of the key questions that underlie the sciences? How are these related to children’s intuitions and questions as reflected in their “works?” How can teachers respond effectively to mandated curriculum and other trends in education? How can teacher’s stories be used to support our joint efforts to affect policy and trends? Computers: Diane Mullins, Pat

*Reflection* love, friendship, presence, layer, layering, and track
[Speaking Out: Teachers on Teaching is published]
1987 Looking at Children and Adults as Makers of Knowledge: A Focus on Science and Science Education (Seventeenth SI)

transition summer dealing with shift to cooperative, all-volunteer, self-sustaining Institute with Steering Committee
disclose questions at the heart of a scientific inquiry (B.McClintock biography)
specify method of inquiry to the questions: positivists, naturalists, phenomenologists
to describe the “work” of the scientist as defined by her/his life
to describe our thinking as we use the processes
participants’ descriptions of “ways of knowing”
What are the/ our assumptions about learning, thinking and knowledge?
the “stories” of science, using biographies of scientists as another entry to the science curriculum
teacher accounts of classroom science
continuing to explore relationships between science and art
T. Chittendon (ETS Science Study): light and shadow; stars, sun and moon
Readings: Max Scheler (selections from The Nature of Sympathy), Whitehead (selections from Modes of Thought)

1987 Fall Conference: Achieving Continuity for Learners: A Discussion of the Diversity and Inclusiveness of Classrooms (Steve Harlow’s presentation on ADD)

1988 Ways of Knowing (Eighteenth SI)

NY State Follow-Up Study in Ithaca
Theme: What are the characteristics of a curriculum when children/young people are assumed to be active makers of knowledge?
What are our assumptions about learning, thinking and knowledge? What are the classroom implications?
Purposes: understand what it means to say all people are active makers of knowledge; to discern and articulate more clearly distinctions that differentiate our thought and practice from other theories and models of teaching; increase our ability to make a compelling and understandable statement of our position to others; through collaborative study, add significant dimensions and perspectives to our ways of looking at children and the activities of the classroom.
Participants’ stories of a child/group of children making knowledge;
What prompted the activity?
Ways in which the activity of making is revealed.
Where the activity lead or expanded to include other knowledge, interests.
What the activity or knowledge formed meant to the children, to the class, to the teacher.
Small group work to explore “ways of knowing” through activities. How what we want to know about something affects the way we go about learning it.
What is the responsibility of the viewer? What is it to affirm human agency?
The “social function of subjectivity” Berger (Another Way of Telling)
What assumptions frame developmental theory? Readings: Piaget (Six Psychological Studies), Gardner (Frames of Mind); Critical analysis of same based on our own classroom experiences

Pat’s presentation of theories of childhood and learning (Rousseau, Froebel, Steiner, Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, …)

Pat’s presentation of assumptions about children and human-ness guiding the “Lifespan” Seminar

Pat’s talk on 8/5 on knowledge, thought, understanding, and intuition

Other Readings: Welty (One Writer’s Beginnings), Soyinka (Ake), Heller (The Disinherited Mind, The Artist’s Journey into the Interior) and Berger (Another Way of Telling)

Ted Chittendon: assumptions around record keeping, documentation and testing sessions: issues of audience, language and numbers. What are the consequences for children? For teachers as practitioners? Parents?

*Reflections*: make, making; map, mapping, authority,

[Pat leaves Prospect for UND in Jan. 1989, and returns in May 1989]

1989 Documenting: The Importance of Standards, Values and Meaning (Nineteenth SI)

[Note: my title, can’t find any letters, documents, etc. other than my notes]

Summary by Cecelia of last year's work around meaning, making, knowledge, making knowledge to evaluation, fills out word, “documentation”

In our classrooms how do we know that children are making knowledge?

Pat’s update on NY State Follow-up study, and issues: the status of knowledge that grows from activity of questioning; inquiry reveals what surfaces of knowledge of child; Is this knowledge usable beyond the place in which it was formed? How does that knowledge serve students? When doing collaborative inquiry, how do interviewers’ presences affect the data? What is the difference between presence in the body and in the voice and the interplay among all that? “Presence in word is a stilled gesture.”

Talk on John Berger, “appearances,” photographs contrasted to drawings

Experience and meaning... how meaning changes over time, meaning different from fact, meaning is a response to known and unknown, meaning and mystery are aligned, meaning housed in process.

List of evidences from classrooms:

When does evaluation become absolutely essential?
What standards are in the form itself?
What in human expression and experience does it overlook?
How inclusive is it of important human needs.
What standards are contained within text of anecdotal report?
What values are expressed?
What assumptions about the nature of human beings and learning are expressed?

Where do we look for evidence that meaning is occurring?

That leads to discussion of standards: relationship between values and standards, expectations and aspirations, external and internal standards.
In looking at report cards we looked at what is expressed and the assumptions. The anecdotal, while they portray students, also reveal a good deal about the teacher who writes them.

Documentation doesn't necessarily have a theory, but rather accrues data and then begins to make statements. Other processes often have theories of child development and collect data to analyze. The former is definitely a more subjective process, while the other claims to be objective.

Small Group work: Active Boys (John Colgan-Davis),
Small Group Work: contrasted Ellen Schwartz's report card narratives with standardized checklist report card, looked at (Gloria's) work

Ted Chittendon: discussion about creating open ended questions contrasted to standardized tests for evaluation: "If you turn the issue into a teacher standards test, if it doesn't work for teachers, what makes them think that it works to assess kids?"

*Reflections* meaning, evidence, rocks, and minerals, star, opportunity, standard, faith

1990 Standards in Schools in a Pluralistic Society Twentieth Summer Institute 20th SI
[Is this the summer I spent writing during the morning sessions, and that's why it's so scant?]

Morning Seminar:
* Looking closely at children who stand out
* Interpretation, recognition and self-reflection
* Classroom discussions: Places for children's voices
* School reports as reflections of individual children and school culture
* Guiding Questions
  How are standards determined?
  Which voices are unheard in the debate?
  How do we form knowledge of all the children we teach?
  What is the effect of this on the children we teach?


Anne Martin: Autobiographical piece around childhood, moving and memories of language acquisition

Descriptive Review: Alice Seletsky's Journal

Small PM Groups: Math (Solving Inequalities) Buck Creamer, looking at blank grading forms, report cards, and narrative reports

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[1991 Prospect School Closes, NY State Study follow-up from 1975 completed, Shared Territory published]

Morning Seminar
A study of the standards and values on which portfolio assessment proposals are based
How does an individual student come to be known, acknowledged and defined by the school community?
What does it mean to define oneself in contrast to being defined by another person?
How can we guide students to a discovery of their own values, particularly those reflected in their works?
Common Reading: Berlin (The Crooked Timber of Humanity: “Two Concepts of Liberty;” and “On the Pursuit of the Ideal”); discussion of conflicting values and the moral dilemmas to which they give rise
Recollection: competing values in public or political situations, those that arise when an individual is defined by another person.
Small Literature Groups: Houston (Farewell to Manzanar), Rodriguez (Hunger of Memory), Kingston (Warrior Woman), (Playing for Time)
Portfolios: Overview of a variety of models from all over the country, for children, for teacher education, for teachers (“Discrepancies papered over with nice language. . .”)
*Reflections* silence, secret, compromise,

1991 Fall Conference: Parent-Teacher Partnerships: Looking at Children, Their work, and the Purposes of Assessment

1992 The Politics of Competing Values, Continued (Fourteenth SI)

Morning Seminar
* National Standards--Personal Aims
* Family and School
* Inquiry and Measurement
* Variety and Uniformity
* Guiding Questions:
How are issues of value framed, publicly and privately, when the centrality of race, class, gender and culture is recognized?
What do classrooms have to be like to support children who stand out?
What would child studies look like if they were framed in the language of national standards?
How can we be more effective in sharing what we learn about children through the process of descriptive inquiry?
* Whole group reflection on “class.” Shared personal narrative about our class identity, using these points as guides: how that knowledge first came to be known and how it operates in our lives now.
NSF consult with Ted Chittendon documenting children’s early science learning
Common readings: Berlin (see 1991) Havel (“The End of the Modern Era”)
Small Literature Groups: Tan (Joy Luck Club), Arnow (The Dollmaker), (The Autobiography of Malcom X), Dorris (Yellow Raft on Blue Water), Hurston (Their Eyes Were Watching God), Cisneros (The House on Mango Street), Kincaid (Lucy)
Small Group: Documentation, individual classroom research
Small Group: Three day child study, Rafael D____ (Presenter Jane Andrias)
*Reflections* class, inquiry, inquire, document, documenting, documentation, recognition, public

[Prospect is moved to BCIC building in North Bennington, Exploring Values and Standards: Implications for Assessment is published]

1992 Fall Working Conference at Sage College: Re-organizational meeting in fall, establishment of a “working board:

1993: Schools as Public Spaces: Variety, Diversity and Inclusion
[Note: Karen taught Inst. I for first week with Betsy and Alice. Will need help to fill in that time.]

Theme: How public spaces serve to support or stand in the way of inclusion, variety and inclusion:

* Comparison as a way of knowing
* Stewardship for all children
* Issues of choice and standardization

*Guiding Questions:
What value is inherent in the idea of “public,” and what endangers it?
What are the effects of the featurelessness that has come to be associated with public institutions, artifacts, and practices?
How is our view of the individual child shaped by our reliance on comparison as a means of forming knowledge?
How can classroom practice give full recognition to individuals and their varieties of aims and purposes?

Morning Seminar:
Small Group Work: Personal reflection on description of two public spaces—one from childhood and one for our current life, what makes them public, who uses them, for what, and sound, look and feel of spaces.
Small Literature Groups: Conway (Road From Cooram), Wright (Black Boy), Angelou (I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings), Alvarez (How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accent), Butler (Good Scent From the Mountains)
Small Group Work: Pulling out themes around public space, and individual

Ted Chittendon: NSF
distinction between “documentation,” keeping track, and assessment,
“intentional” science, and “incidental” science, how children observe and
describe the natural world, recollections of ourselves as learners of science,
Pat’s summary of recollection, what we learn along with students, and about
students. Children’s visual statements about science (examples from kids’
science journals)

Recollection of “drawing”

Descriptive Review of a Child: Bruce Turnquist
Small Group Work: Personal recollection on entering a group, how recognition
came, your role in that, the group’s role

*Reflections* privilege, shadows, cage, silence,

1994 Creating a Public Space: Work, Self, Agency
[Note: Karen and Andy hiking in Colorado and New Mexico, will need help gathering materials]

Shaping idea came from Berlin: “What constitutes a self?... Who among us is
recognized as possessing a self and so is regarded as autonomous and free--an individual
on an equal footing with other individuals?”

*Guiding Questions:

What does a school have to be in order that each child be recognized and heard?
What does a community have to be so that each member may contribute?
What does our commitment have to be so that the work of education benefits
children?

What is the nature of our commitment to schools as workplaces for everyone?
What must we do to enable each child to be the agent of his/her own learning?
What is the importance of work in the recognition of self?

What is the importance of work in the recognition of the person in relation to
standards and values?

What is the nature of our work as teachers and where is the self, as an agent, in
that work?

Morning Seminar:

Reflection on “agency” and shared recollections of a time when we felt released
and had a sense of independence and of a piece of work that carried us
beyond ourselves, that in its making or doing helped us see things in a new
light or new perspective.

1995 Creating a Public Space: Work, Self and Agency II
[Note: Karen taught Inst. I first week with Sara, will need help filling in]

*Questions which frame the Institute:

What does a school have to be in order that each child be recognized and heard?
What does a community have to be so that each member may contribute?
What does our commitment have to be so that the work of education benefits children?
What is the importance of work and works in the recognition of the person in relation to standards and values?
What does our commitment of the recognition of the person have to be so that we take the time to look closely and describe?
Whole group recollection: What allows/invites people to come together to discuss and pursue an idea or course of action or what allows/invites the making of a collaborative work or working collaboratively?
Small Group Readings: DuBois (The Souls of Black Folk), Kundera (The Art of the Novel), Rich (What is Found There), Horton (The Long Haul), Morrison (Beloved)
continuation of NSF Science Study

1996 Finding Political Ground: Self and Works in Public Space
[Note: Karen taught Inst. I first week with Lynne and Kiran, will need help filling in]

*Questions which frame the Institute:
What are the political and ethical issues which face us?
What does it mean to be an educator in this political context?
How can we enact our political selves in the silencing atmosphere? What do our commitments have to be to create "islands of decency?"
What are the important unexamined assumptions shaping our context and what are their effects on children?
What is the importance of work and works in the recognition of the person and creation of inclusive communities?
What does our commitment of the recognition of the person have to be so that we take the time to look closely and describe?

Morning Seminar: Finding Political Ground:
Put along side each other the ideas of:
* space and boundary
* freedom and discipline
* limitation and expansion
exploration of these ideas through our recollections, three spanning child studies, and one teacher review of practice.
reflection on "political" and "ethical,"
Common reading: Camus (The Plague): keeping track of variations in moral and ethical stances of figures, issues which affect you the reader, political and moral questions and issues of the book
Small Group Reflections: Time/places/works/circumstances when you experienced the greatest sense of movement and space opening up. Next, when you wanted/yearned for a limit, a focus, a boundary, a discipline. Then a time when it was absolutely necessary to break a boundary, to break out of a space, to breach or leap over a wall (15 mins. to present)
Common Readings: Williams (The Long Revolution, "The Creative Mind"),
Doty (Atlantis, "Description") In connection with observation and
description
Small Group Work: Description of a natural object
Small Group Readings: Morrison (Beloved, Racing Power, Engendering Justice),
Kundera (The Art of the Novel, Immortality), Salgado (Workers: An
Archaeology of the Industrial Age), Morisot (The Wet Nurse, a painting)
Nochlin (Women, Art and Power and Other Essays, "Morisot's Wet Nurse:
The Construction of Work and Leisure in Impressionist Painting"), Philip
(Shes Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks), Brodine (Illegal
Assembly), Rich (Time's Power: Poems, 1985-88"One Life," and
"Divisions of Labor") Cruz (poems and letter)

Children who are impelled to move (Two spanning studies of children)
*Reflections* detail

1997 Finding Political Ground: Knowledge, Inquiry, Standards
[Note: Karen taught Inst. I first week with Lynne and Bruce, will need help filling in]

*Questions which frame the Institute:
What are the important unexamined assumptions and values shaping what counts
as evidence and is recognized as such?
What is the status of knowledge and ways of knowing in schools?
Whose knowledge counts when educational decisions are made about children?
Whose knowledge counts in setting educational priorities and policy?
What does it mean to be vigilant in our settings?
How do we make our voices and the knowledge we have of children, teaching,
and learning "hearable"?
What is at stake in the "standards" issue?
What is the importance of work and works in the recognition of children’s ways
of knowing and their standards?
What does our commitment to the recognition of the person have to be so that we
take the time to look closely and describe?

Morning Seminar:
Common Readings: Camus (The Plague, pp. 45-51), Morrison (Lecture and
Speech of Acceptance upon Award of the Noble Prize for Literature),
Nemerov (“Speaking Silence”)
Recollection and description:
Describe a time when you felt you were an authority or had authority (context, sources,
evidence, what it meant to you). When you felt your authority was undermined or eroded
(see above). A circumstance in which you accepted someone or something outside
yourself as having authority (see above).
Common Reading: Williams (The Long Revolution, “The Creative Mind”)
thinking about observation and description
Small Group Readings: Kundera (The Art of the Novel, Immortality), Morisot
(The Wet Nurse, a painting) Nochlin (“Morisot’s Wet Nurse: The
Construction of Work and Leisure in Impressionist Painting”), Rich (An

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Atlas of the Difficult World, What is Found There selections), Film: Roger and Me, and Rifkin’s (The End of Work, Chap. 2), and Achebe (Things Fall Apart and Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays).

Drawing and Description Seminar: Silent drawing of a natural object, verbal description, silent drawing, another description, summary

Small Group Work: Spanning Child Study: Barbara Batton; Teacher’s Review of Practice: Gina Ritscher

*Reflections* responsibility, authority

1997 Fall Conference: Teachers, Parents, and Children: Knowing Children, Authoring Standards, Speaking with Authority

1998 Finding Political Ground: Knowledge, Inquiry and Authority

*Questions which frame the Institute*

What are the important unexamined assumptions and values shaping what counts as evidence and is recognized as knowledge and as having authority?

What is the status of knowledge and ways of knowing in schools?

Whose knowledge and authority counts when educational decisions are made about children? Whose knowledge and authority counts in setting educational priorities and policy?

What does it mean to be vigilant in our settings?

How do we make our voices and the knowledge we have of children, teaching, and learning “hearable”?

What is at stake in the “standards” issue?

In terms of the “standards” issue what are the political and educational issues which face us?

What is the importance of work and works in the recognition of children’s ways of knowing and their standards?

What does our commitment to the recognition of the person have to be so that we take the time to look closely and describe?

Morning Seminars

Weaving together ideas of the nature of history, a sense of place, and the shaping of memory-- What is at stake in terms or our history? How is memory/history shaped? What are the moral aspects of knowledge making and authority?

Small Group Work: Review of Perspective (process): 45 minute presentation for each person to identify some important and lasting outlook, point of view, way of looking at or thinking about things. Particularize in emblematic memories, episodes traced throughout lifespan to show how you perceive your perspective/orientation altering and becoming more complex. Think about contexts, close to hand and larger ones such as historical events, race, culture, or generation. How does this perspective play itself out in a variety of circumstances, or in figuring out moral or ethical issues? This is not a therapeutic session, but a way of tracing the threads of the values you have come to hold. Allow added 10 minutes for response.

Small Group Work: Spanning Study of a Child
Small Group Work: Teacher Review of Practice: Lynne Strieb.

Small Group Work: What knowledge is and how we come to know things. The core role of language in description as a source for knowledge making, and how description shapes our perception of the world. Process: Select a natural object, and spend time with it, describe it, and keep a journal account of your description, thoughts. Choose a medium through which to describe what you know and understand about that object. Present to your small group.

Select one, and sign up for small group close readings and discussion:
Williams (The Long Revolution, "Images of Society")
Rukeyser (The Life of Poetry, and selected poems
Wills (Lincoln at Gettysburg) and Lincoln ("The Gettysburg Address")
Barker (Regeneration) and Fussell (The Great War and Modern Memory, "Adversary Proceedings")
Morrison (Paradise) and Berlin (The Crooked Timber of Humanity, "The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West")
film "Fact and Fiction" and Coles (Doing Documentary Work).
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___________. "Speaking Silence," in *Figures of Thought.*


Park, Clara. *The Siege.*

Pattison. *On Literacy.*


Welty, Eudora. *One Writer's Beginning.*


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A Bibliography of Prospect-Related Publications


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Appendix C

Descriptive Review: Josh 11/4/00

**Family background:** a brother in 5th grade, a sister in kindergarten, living together with both parents. This is the second year of a rededicated elementary school and Josh’s first year in the school. He attended kindergarten and first grade with some of the same students. Then the family moved and he transferred to another school in the district, attending three schools in four years.

**Focusing question:** Because he is a child with many capacities and strengths, but who is reported to be below grade level in reading, with the fourth grade tests looming, Karen wants our help in discovering ways to build on his capacities in order to support and foster reading - without signaling him out or going against him. (Another question in Karen’s mind is how provisioning influences what as a teacher, she is able to see and know about a child -- and how that plays into the child’s access to learning and to the child’s access to educational opportunities.

**Physical Presence and Gesture**

Josh is a slight, but agile, eight year old boy, with green, almond shaped eyes and light brown hair. Even in repose his face is expressive with a quiet, closed mouth smile. When he moves, “bouncy” comes to mind. Enjoys gathering around the desks of others in the morning and talking, or moving in a cluster to look at something on display. Enters the hall in the morning moving sideways, quickly on the toes and at an angle to his friends, smiling, gesturing and talking. Hangs up things in cubby and takes out his folder, seems to settle on his feet, and walks quietly to the door where I stand to greet children. Looks up briefly and smiles.

Needs to be reminded to take down chair and get his writing folder. Engages in quiet conversations with others around the folder crate as they wait their turn. Once in his seat, he begins to reread what he had written earlier. Rarely asks for a writing conference with me or with a peer. Bends over as he intently writes, alternating with fairly long periods of looking off into space, left elbow resting on his desk’s surface, and index finger gently moving below his lips (a characteristic gesture), while his right hand still holds the pencil. Meanwhile his seat mate is up and down, turning about, chatting with neighbors, off sharpening his pencil, talking to me, and so on. Josh may look up and smile at all this restlessness, but quickly returns to his writing. When I announce that soon it will be class meeting, he stands, lingering over his work. He is often one of the last to slip into the circle on the rug (another characteristic).

He places himself on the periphery of the rug for writing shares, one leg bent under him, his bottom resting on his heel while his elbow is propped on the other knee bent in front of his chest, gazing off into space. He sometimes gently rocks his whole body in this position. Once, when it was a good friend’s turn to read, I watched him shift
into a crab walk position, belly up, hands beneath his shoulders, bottom off the floor, and feet ready to go. He navigated around and through his classmates who were clustered at one end of the rug until he was sitting directly in front of his friend who was reading. There he sat with his hands wrapped around his knees, smiling with full attention during a nine page, third grade adventure story filled with events and narrow escapes all proceeding at a rapid clip. Not one of his classmates protested when Josh smoothly inserted himself in front of them, which speaks to his relationship with them. If another child had done that, there would have most likely been loud protests.

On the playground Josh tends not to join the majority of boys playing football tossing games or soccer in the big adjoining field. I have never seen him on the swings, where many boys play at seeing how high they can go. Instead he plays with one or two others on the multi-leveled playground equipment where there is a big slide and platforms. Watching him I am reminded of his drawings, which show many levels, each one guarded by a toothy monster. Josh and his friends constantly talk as they move in a cluster in and out, up and down, occasionally jumping off and chasing one another, arms extended and making noises. This week he was zipping down the curved slide with four others, a game of grasping the overhead bar at the head of the slide and propelling themselves down in rapid succession. At one point I looked up to see him piled on top of a friend as both sped down together, laughing as they tumbled off the end of the slide, clambering to their feet, and running up the ladder for another go. At that point I had to step in and monitor the slide. When we line up he comes quickly and can usually be found in the middle of the line, rather than at the end where playground balls are passed back and forth until we enter the building.

Once indoors, his body quiets, but when he is excited he bends his knees and rapidly moves up and down, feet remaining on the floor. Even when seated on a chair, he bounces gently up and down on his bottom with a big grin on his face. Overall he is generally more contained, dreamy or pensive, which is why it was so unusual to see him crab walk on the rug. So in some sense his attention is also on the periphery. He rarely raises his hand to volunteer something in a whole group discussion, and never calls out or interrupts anyone. During class meetings run by a student, or during a sharing, now and then he will raise his hand and ask a question, but mainly stays to the outside of the circle where he sits, knees to chest, attentive, and sometimes initiating touching games with the person beside him.

Sometimes he becomes excited or engages in mutual teasing and bumps up against classmates, sometimes briefly chasing them. When I remind him to settle down, he remains in place, but continues to bounce slightly on his toes, the energy redirected, but not contained. If he needs redirecting for an assigned tasks he will doodle in the margins of a paper, gaze off into space, or engage his seat mate in pointing or whispering about his doodles, or the supplies in their desks.
Josh speaks quietly, both when conversing with friends, and when speaking with me. After he signs up for a whole class writing share and it is his turn, he asks me to read his story aloud, standing quietly at my side and leaning into me. When I look up, sometimes to clarify a word, he is smiling broadly.

Disposition and Temperament

In general, Josh has an even temperament, quietly alert and energetic with a small smile. I have yet to see him sad or angry, just a quiet tear on the day he bumped his knee rather badly on the play equipment. When fully engaged with a task, his body is curved over his work, and he seems oblivious to his surroundings. His biggest smiles are when he is most active, either indoors or out, but especially when he is outdoors playing and running with his friends. His arms move out from his body, and he darts about, coming to abrupt stops and quickly shifting directions. If he is chasing a friend, he is usually laughing.

He is very engaged with his artwork both at home and at school and takes time to gather his materials and settle into his work on a task. Both parents are graphic artists. Each morning at breakfast he asks his father to draw for him. When he brought out his work to show me at the house, towards the end of my visit, he came down the stairs carrying a framed oil painting, which he ceremoniously turned around to show me. His father laughed, because it was a painting of a farm that he had done in high school. Apparently Josh’s goal is to be able to paint like that when he is in high school. When they moved into their house this fall, he found the painting and hung it on his bedroom wall.

Josh seems very close to his older brother, and a figure much like him appears as a hero in several of his stories. Recently, when he read aloud to me from one of the books in the *Poppy/Ragweed* series by Avi, it was clear to both of us that it was too difficult for his present reading level. When asked how he came to choose this book, he said that Poppy was his brother’s favorite book in third grade. When I mentioned this to his parents, they said his brother read it in fourth grade. Josh clearly has aspirations for himself. In looking through his learning log I came across one page where I had asked the children to write down one thing on which they wanted to focus for this term. He wrote that he wanted to be a better reader, and next to that he wrote, “read an hour a day” “practice,” “read aloud.”

Although he is a soft-spoken child at home as well as at school, his drawings are “loud,” often filled with cartoon bubbles containing sound effects. The characters yell in his stories and there are loud sound effects written in upper-case letters. During our morning class meeting Josh has referred to problems on the playground when older children have been teasing, pushing and generally being too rough with him during lunch recess. He doesn’t understand why they would do that. They play with him in the neighborhood. He thought they were his friends, but when when they are at school around their classmates, they tease him and other boys in our class. Deep feelings are expressed through his writing and artwork. When he wants me or others to notice
something, he asks if we would like to see it, then brings us to look, standing quietly, almost reverently, alongside. He simply enjoys the shared looking.

Connections with Other People

I first notice Josh's movements before I hear his voice. Quick and wide, smiling, or making amusing faces, sometimes quietly conspiratorial, he can be a quiet instigator of merriment or mischief. His previous teachers have also noted the same characteristics, and mentioned that his behavior "needs work" during "unstructured times." He rarely works alone, except during writing workshop, when he prefers to sit alongside another child or work with classmates on a project. A maker and a builder, during project time or indoor recess Josh prefers to draw, paint, or use the marble roll in the company of two to three others. He is also admires others, letting them know their that he appreciates their agility, humor, or skills in drawing or building.

His own engaging, humorous nature and even temperament make him a valued playmate. Josh's skill is acknowledged and utilized by classmates. Others will ask his advice or even ask him to draw for them on their own projects. Josh gets along equally well with girls and boys, but tends, as mentioned earlier, to spend time with others who will engage in a dramatic storyline when playing. I have not heard him make disparaging remarks about other classmates. During a recent small group assignment in our colonial studies, he persuaded the two other children in his group to map an entire village. Although they shared the drawing of the map, I believe most of the broad structure of the plan was his. I only caught brief bits of conversation as I circulated among the groups. Children in the other groups simply divided up their poster murals into four sections and assigned one another a topic.

I visited him at his house on a Sunday afternoon to select work to bring for this Conference and we all had tea together, his parents along with his five year old sister. Josh hovered around and took out different pieces from the pile stacked on the hassock, and then asked his mother if he could bring down more from upstairs. His little sister went off to the adjacent room where she cut pictures out of magazines, which she would periodically bring out to show. Sometimes she would comment on Josh’s work as well. The older brother left for soccer try-outs shortly after I arrived. Towards the end when I was sitting and talking more to the parents, Josh and his sister played quietly at the other end of the living room. Apparently Josh can spend long periods of time alone working on a drawing or playing up in his room with Legos, and Kinex. As I got up to leave, our conversation moved out onto the front porch, whereupon Josh, quietly inserted himself, and stood beside me on the porch and smiled broadly. I was so involved in my conversation that I had forgotten to say good-bye!

Josh has considerable visual strengths. I find that he approaches me most frequently if I am sitting or standing quietly. Since my visit to collect materials for this presentation, he has approached me more often to ask things. During the insect study, he spent more time than many children checking out the insects from day to day and noting changes. He was the first to spot the fact that our large garden spider had an egg sack and
then one day announced to me and then the class that the spiderlings had just hatched. While he likes to work alongside adults or be shown (particularly by father and uncle) how to draw, he also enjoys looking at something together. Josh talks about illustrations in books, stopping to point out aspects of an illustration as he reads. Although he enjoys the recognition by adults of his artistic abilities and will point out details in his work, he would prefer if the adult noticed first. In fact I told him that perhaps some of you might take a few moments to write him a note about something in his work that you found interesting.

Interests and Preferences

Josh often asks “how” questions. For example, how do insects see? Wondering about how things fit together, are constructed, what is hidden from view. His own drawings are sometimes cut-a-ways, revealing many levels in a fantasy environment. He likes looking at science books, like our insect ones, that show enlarged, close-up photographs. He also takes out books on construction to look at how they build bridges and tunnels, the machinery, and exploded illustrations that to show components. He is also attracted to science books that have a small circle illustrating an enlargement of one section. His preferred activities are drawing and construction with Legos, blocks, and clay working alongside his brother or friends. It was interesting to look through his learning log and come across an entry where we had discussed as a class what we would take on a Mayflower voyage in the present if we were only allow the space of a small sea chest. Referring to work samples:
[read aloud].

It is especially important that there is an audience for his work, whether it is displayed in classroom, at home on a bedroom door, (a homisote (sp.) wall for display is going to be put up at home). According to the art teacher who has known him for two years, if something doesn’t turn out as he might have wished, he plays with the materials, and works around or incorporates the mistake, and is able to articulate his thinking around that.

[Example is the line along the back of the brontosaurus sea creature’s back. Couldn’t quite get the perspective of how the spines would be seen coming straight off towards the viewer, knew he didn’t have it right, erased them, but through just a line was able to show the turn in the head and neck, which was important to him.]

That is he can recognize what he wants, but doesn’t yet have the skills he needs to execute it the way he envisions it. Many of his drawings have bright, earthy colors, greens, yellows, browns, oranges, and occasional reds. He tends toward line drawings, but is equally comfortable with paints.
Modes of Thinking

Josh spends a long time looking, thinking, and talking about what he observes with classmates. During our daily sustained “curl up with a book time” he snuggles in with a group who often take their rug samples and sit leaning against the wall in a row. They read fiction, and he does too. However, while they are reading children’s novels he is reading picture books that he quietly points to and talks about to a friend. Occasionally he will find an easy chapter book to dip into daily. The same pattern also holds true at home. Although he is very attuned to how others “see” the world through their art, and enjoys looking through their eyes, he has yet to find his own entry into reading chapter books.

Throughout the school years, math problem solving is a difficulty mentioned by his teachers on his report cards. Our math period begins with individual or paired work followed by a whole group discussion period. Children may then return to work in pairs or groups, and come together once more in order to demonstrate their various strategies on the board. Children are asked to “show their thinking” on scratch paper. Josh is fairly careful with his work, taking great pride in his developing cursive, doesn’t scribble or do preparatory sketches. The notion of using math scratch paper to try out a number of quick sketches, number lines, graphs, lists, tables is not his mode of working. This is an area that will require further observation on my part, but he works quite slowly. If we are working in geometry and pattern, using manipulatives, he is very satisfied and capable. For example when we do anything with Tangrams, he is quick to perceive the solution and enjoys being a “coach” to others who have great difficulty with this.

When he is seated during instructional times, he will sit back and quietly observe, often with an elbow on his desk and gently rubbing beneath his lower lip with the fingertips of one hand, the other holding a pencil. Sometimes at his desk he will listen with both hands inside, rolling the pencils back and forth on the front groove. In contrast, if we are singing, playing games, or it is physical education, his energy is barely contained and he bounces on his toes with a broad smile on his face as he waits to begin. Previous teachers have referred to his tendency for “silliness.” His mother mentions his “getting his sillies out first” before he can fully attend in a way that she would like.

In the past teachers have noted many missing assignments. This year there has been only one case of forgetting and he called his mother who brought it over to school. The assignment was to draw a character map in his weekly home reading journal. One can imagine him leaving for school either showing his work at the breakfast table, or engaged in “silliness” with his older brother and bouncing out the door before he realized that he had forgotten it. In this case, he said it was in his bag in the hall, but when he went to get it, it wasn’t there. He seemed uncomfortable and embarrassed, face coloring ever so slightly and his eyes down-cast. Transitions seems to be difficult for him, and he definitely prefers advance warning if we are moving on to another activity. He would like to leave all his materials in view on his desktop, but this is not possible. I often have to remind him to put things away so he has a clear workspace, or so that others can have access to a table. He tidies up slowly and carefully, again, joining us at the last minute.
Josh greatly enjoys science: (units this year are insects, mammals, weather, simple machines, and the human skeletal/muscle systems) He also likes music, recess, writing workshop, project times, math, if it involves patterns and geometry, drama (being an animal that makes noises, not speaking parts), movement games with singing, geography, looking at atlases, or richly illustrated history books. I would appreciate some suggestions for how these activities can be used to support him. Our current colonial unit appears to engaging for him, and he is currently organizing the large bulletin board space for a whole class mural. The reading level for social studies is a bit difficult for him right now, but if he is paired with another student he seems to fool around less because he can get immediate support.

Another concern around Josh has to do his reluctance to do any assigned, structured writing assignments for example a write-up of an experiment, or a response prompt. In art or writing workshop he has the latitude to adapt the assignment to his liking. During instructional writing periods we address various genres in anticipation of third grade state MCAS tests in reading and written responses. There may be mini-lessons in structural analysis or grammar as well. Writing assignments were problematic for Josh as early as first grade. His teacher wrote, “Sometimes it is a problem because he is so creative.” She noted his difficulties in sustaining his focus when skills were difficult for him or the assignment topic didn’t interest him. His second grade teacher writes that “silliness gets in the way of his best self,” and that he often needed to be refocused by an adult.

What he values, and what he will need to do when he is expected to write an essay in response to a prompt that might not interest him, is something I anticipate will be challenging. The same issue arises on multiple-choice standardized tests where the examples are short, often out of context, and rather dull. He might lose interest, and then lose his focus, and before he knows it, the time is up, and he has to put his pencil down. On the other hand, because he thinks deeply about things, he spends too much time stay eliminating choices in different sections in a multiple choice test, and the time will be up before he finishes.

I have found so far, if the material is engaging, Josh can write about it at length. In my experience, telling stories or developing narrative lines around what we are studying helps engage students such as Josh. It puts boring facts in a more accessible context. Students can then tell stories about their own experiences, for example about insects or local history, such as our current work in colonial times.

A question embedded within the above: How outside expectations and standards affect a child’s learning and self-evaluation?
HALLOWEEN AND THE FARMER’S LITTLE DUCK

By Josh

One day in a far-away land, a farmer had a little Duck with a big quack.
“Quack, quack, quack, don’t get into the farmer’s sack,” sang a little Duck with
a big, big quack, which was a little black duck.
“Quack, quack, quack, Halloween is coming, weho!” and he went to the mouse.
“Oh, mouse!” the Duck said.
“A...a...a... achoo!!”
“Waah eek,” Crash! The Duck slammed into the wall.
“I’ve gots a gold,” said the little mouse, “sorry.”
“That’s OK,” said the little Duck.

TOMORROW IS Halloween, he he,” squealed the rooster on the hay stack.
“I’m gong to BE THE Mask of Zorro!” squealed the mouse who blew the Duck
to the wall. When night fell the Duck couldn’t sleep because he was too excited because
Halloween was tomorrow. Then finally he fell asleep.
The next morning he woke up and shouted, “Halloween.”
Everybody woke up and shouted, “He hoo!” and got out of bed and scattered all
over the barn yard. The Duck came down the spiral staircase to the barnyard with his
costume on.
“Ah, ah, ah,” screamed the sheep, the lamb, the horse, the cow, the mouse, the cat,
the Dog, and the rooster.
“Well I’m the Headless Horseman,” quacked the duck.
The mouse ran inside and put on his costume.
“I’m aaaaach . . . ch . . . ch . . . ch . . . ch . . . choooooooolllllllllllm, I’m the mask of
Zorro, and my special attack, hmmmm? What’s this? Black shoe footprints? Sniff, sniff.
Hmmm, smells like a dracula, wa?
“Draculas don’t live around here.”
“Well maybe it’s Bob, he wears black boots that smell like Dracula.”
“Well, well, OK, I was just kidding,” said the mouse. “Let’s go to the haunted
house.”
“Oooo, I wouldn’t do that, it could catch you,” said the sheep which had been
around longer than 100 years.
“Ya, ya, ya, ya,” said the Duck, “I can stand anything.
“Oh yeah?” said the sheep, “Well how about the time you went under the table, or
the time you scared the mouse, or”
“OK, OK,” said the Duck.
“Let’s get some sleep to have energy when it’s Halloween time, “ said the sheep.
“I will make the party, and you sleep.”
“OK” said everyone. And when they woke up it was done.
“On my,” said the sheep, “Awake already. You are fast sleepers.”
“Come on,” cried the Duck, “Let’s go to the haunted house.”
“OK,” everyone said.
“WOW! Watch out, in-coming ball,” shouted the Duck.
AAAhhh,” everyone screamed.
“Wow, Dad, that was a good one,” said Norm.
“Indeed it was,” said Mike.

That night they got to the haunted house.
“Jeez this place is creepy,” said the Duck.
“I know,” said the mouse.
“A spi . . . a spittledeed, a thpie . . . a spiderble,” said the rooster.
“It’s a spider, said the Duck.
“Oh,” said the rooster.
“Waaal!” screamed the Duck as he fell into a pit.
“Ooff,” said the Duck when he hit the ground.
“Smack,” the doors that he fell through, closed shut.
“Who?” said the Duck as the lights went on.
“Blo blo bl . . . cr . . . cr . . . af ‘grrrr’ chm I’ve come to suck your blood, blo blo he, he, he,” said something in the dark. “I’ve got it right, I’ve got it right, I’ve never gotten it right my whole life, I’ve got it right, I’ve got it right,” sang the creature in the dark.

“Who the heck is that?” said the Duck to himself. “Who the heck would say, blah, blah . . . ‘I’ve come to suck blood?’” said the duck to himself.
“It is . . . ahaah!”
“Hey, get out of here!”
“Yooouoo,” screamed the duck as he went flying out of the house. “I think I had enough for tonight!” He walked back home and crawled in bed, but didn’t notice everyone else was sound asleep. Even Mike and Norm.

THE END
10/27/00

If I was on the Mayflower, I would bring all my little stuffed animals, my acorn figures, my cork gun, my pepper and my pencils, my ropes, my clay, my mothballs, and my rubber chicken.
Appendix D

Schedule for 1999 Institute on Descriptive Inquiry

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<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<td><strong>Sunday 7/25/99</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Arrival and Registration</td>
<td>12:00-1:45</td>
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<tr>
<td>Whole Group Meeting</td>
<td>2:00-5:30</td>
<td>Welcome, Review of Ideas Shaping this Institute</td>
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<td>Small Groups: Introductions</td>
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<td>Social Hour with Institute 1</td>
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<td><strong>Monday 7/26/99</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Whole Group Orientation and Meeting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Main Seminar: Small Groups</td>
<td>9:00-12:00</td>
<td>Reflection: “real”</td>
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<td>Personal Recollection: real, reality</td>
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<td>Lunch</td>
<td>12:00-1:30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Major Seminars</td>
<td>1:30-3:30</td>
<td>Archive Child (Alva) Study</td>
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<td>History of Ideas Institute II</td>
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<td>CPE Child (Jindai) Study</td>
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<td>Remainder of day free for study and preparation</td>
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<td><strong>Tuesday 7/27/99</strong></td>
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<td>Whole Group Review and Meeting</td>
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<td>Lunch</td>
<td>12:00-1:30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Afternoon Sessions</td>
<td>1:30-3:30</td>
<td>Three Descriptions of “works”</td>
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<td>Gender Discussion</td>
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<td>Recollection: Feeling competent</td>
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<td>Evening free for study and preparation</td>
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<td><strong>Wednesday 7/28/99</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Whole Group Review and Meeting</td>
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<td>Major Seminars</td>
<td>9:00-12:00</td>
<td>Archive Child (Alva) Study</td>
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<td>Lunch</td>
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Afternoon Sessions
  Looking at parent letters
  Values apparent in school brochure
Evening Session
  Values revealed in school newsletters
  Students and adults who have trouble coming to reading
  Experiences using construction in the classroom

Thursday 7/29/99
Whole Group Meeting: Review of I. Berlin
Major Seminars
  Small Groups: Isaiah Berlin essay, “The Sense of Reality” in *The Sense of Reality*
Lunch
Afternoon Seminars
  Negotiating in a school setting “working and reworking the system”
  Provisioning a classroom and choice
Evening Session
  Journal writing and optional sharing

Friday 7/30/99
Whole Group Review and Meeting
Major Seminars
  Small Groups: Isaiah Berlin essay, “The Sense of Reality” in *The Sense of Reality*
Lunch 12:00-1:30
Afternoon Sessions
  Monet Unit and “Gallery”
Evening free

Monday 8/2/99
Whole Group Review and Meeting
Major Seminars Description
  Small Groups: Alfred North Whitehead, Lecture Two, “Expression” in *Modes of Thought*
  Reflection: “Express/Expression”
Lunch 12:00-1:30
Afternoon Sessions
  Documentary study of elementary math
  Responding to third graders in math: Where to start?
  Place based education/geography
Evening Session
  Reflection in “intimacy”
  Watching and responding to classroom video:
  “Room for Ned”
Tuesday 8/3/99

Whole Group Review and Meeting 8:30-9:00
Major Seminar Description 9:00-12:00
- Small Groups: Description of “gesture” through
drawing a natural object
- Integrative discussion and summary of Whitehead
  and drawing lesson
Lunch 12:00-1:30
Afternoon Sessions 1:30-3:30
- Recollections around documentation in schools
Planning for November 1999 Conference 4:00-5:30
Evening Session 7:15-9:00
- Elementary Science: How children think about big ideas
  (e.g., silkworms)
- Supporting and providing for new teachers and student teachers

Wednesday 8/4/99

Whole Group and Meeting: November conference 8:30-9:00
Major Seminar: Literature Groups 9:00-12:00
- Small Groups: The Reader/Fragments, Dakota/Badland!
  “The Country of the Mind” from Arctic Dreams, Lincoln
  at Gettysburg, Dreams of My Russian Summers,
  Teacher with a Heart! "Letter from Birmingham Jail,"
  Song of the Simple Truth
Lunch 12:00-1:30
Afternoon Session 1:30-3:30
- Review of Curriculum: Wuzzies
- Description of work/practice
Evening Sessions 7:15-9:00
- Articles by Alice and Anne
- Art of three boys: Issues of violence

Thursday 8/5/99

Whole Group Meeting 8:30-9:00
Major Seminars 9:00-12:00
- Major Seminar: Literature Groups 9:00-12:00
- Small Groups: The Reader/Fragments, Dakota/Badland!
  “The Country of the Mind” from Arctic Dreams, Lincoln
  at Gettysburg, Dreams of My Russian Summers,
  Teacher with a Heart! "Letter from Birmingham Jail,"
  Song of the Simple Truth
Lunch 12:00-1:30
Afternoon Sessions 1:30-3:00
- Review of Work/Practice
  Why do we do this work? How do we make it public?
Evening Session 7:15-9:00
Friday 8/6/99

Whole Group Meeting 8:30-9:00
Major Seminars 9:00-12:00
  Major Seminar: Literature Groups 9:00-12:00
  Small Groups: The Reader/Fragments, Dakota/Badland/
  “The Country of the Mind” from Arctic Dreams, Lincoln
  at Gettysburg, Dreams of My Russian Summers,
  Teacher with a Heart/”Letter from Birmingham Jail,”
  Song of the Simple Truth
Lunch 12:00-1:30
Afternoon Sessions: Institute Summaries 1:30-3:30
  Small Groups: Review notes, trace threads of interest,
  and connections
  Vermont Craft Fair: Manchester
Evening: Art New England final show 8:00

Saturday 8/7/99

Whole Group Meeting: 9:00-12:00
  Individual recommendations for next summer: texts,
  topics, threads, etc.
  Closure