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CHAPTER 1

PROSPECT'S DESCRIPTIVE PROCESSES

Patricia F. Carini

Every experience is a moving force. Its value can be judged only on the ground of what it moves toward and into. . . . It is then the business of the educator to see in what direction an experience is heading. . . . Failure to take the moving force into account so as to judge and direct it on the ground of what it is moving into means disloyalty to the principle of experience itself.

(Dewey, 1938, p. 38)

When Prospect's doors opened in mid-September of 1965, there was a multiage class of 23 5- through 7-year-olds from all walks of life and from all across the Bennington community. There was one teacher, Marion Stroud, who brought with her substantial experience in the British Infant Schools, including her understanding of ungraded, mixed-age classrooms. The other founders were Joan Blake and Patricia and Louis Carini. All four of us actively participated in the school and in shaping its philosophy and commitments.

We brought with us substantial knowledge of John Dewey's philosophy, and progressive educational and social aims more generally. I was (and am) especially fond of the phrase "moving force" in the passage I have quoted. It says quite well, I think, what we at Prospect were striving for: learning experiences that lead on, and which, as Dewey (1938) also says, "arouse curiosity, strengthen initiative, and set up desires and purposes sufficiently intense to carry a person over dead places in the future" (p. 38).

From its very beginnings, the classrooms at Prospect featured plentiful choices for children, opportunities to make things from a rich array of open-

ended and natural materials, ample use of the out-of-doors, and reading, writing, and math taught with individual attention to each child. As an observer on a daily basis, what I saw in Prospect's classrooms matched Dewey's vision: children engaged with media, ideas, experiences and in motion with these, both following their lead and making choices of where to go next.

The passage matches just as well with another Prospect aim. From the start, we were committed to an examination of the school's practice through observing, recording, and describing what happened in the classrooms and for children on a daily and continuing basis. The idea was that a school and a staff could create a comprehensive plan for doing this kind of observational inquiry and that such an investigation could be school-based—that a school could itself generate knowledge of children, of curriculum, of learning and teaching.

The aim was straightforward: to have those observations fold directly into practice. By documenting the children's growth and learning, the curriculum and the classrooms, and the school more generally, we expected to do what Dewey says: to sustain the school as a "moving force," leading on from the edges of its own experience and thinking.

Speaking personally, although so much of what I now think and know about this kind of descriptive inquiry unfolded from these original commitments, some things were fairly clear to me from the start. For example, I knew that the design of the multifaceted inquiry plan we envisioned had to focus on *process*. In practice, this meant to me paying close attention to how a child goes about learning or making something, and not only to assessment of what the child learned, made, or did. I reasoned that it is when a teacher can see this process, *the child in motion*, the child engaged in activities meaningful to her, that it is possible for the teacher to gain the insights needed to adjust her or his own approaches to the child accordingly.

At Prospect, I felt that to an unusual degree we had a setting optimal in its opportunities to see children in action and in motion. I was well aware, and so was everyone else at Prospect, that this was a context offering opportunities for teachers as well as learners that were different from those available in a school that relied mainly on verbal responses to assignments with built-in answers. In that other and more familiar circumstance, what counted and also what was observable were mostly end-products—responses that could be assessed on the spot as "right" or "wrong." The child either got the correct answer or didn't. In this kind of conventional educational arrangement, it was the child who was being inspected and assessed, and it was up to him or her to conform and measure up to the demands set by school in whatever terms the school set them.

What we at Prospect were aiming to do argued with that construction. Our aim was to tailor learning to the learner. For that aim to be credible, it

was essential to be able to see and to reflect on how a child was going about making sense of the world. Otherwise how could we go about reexamining and reworking the educative surround to support better the child's efforts? The ever-strengthening commitment to a setting with natural and malleable materials and opportunities for both choice and sustained involvement provided an extraordinary opportunity for teachers to do this kind of observing. We had other advantages. None of us at Prospect was working solo. Committed to a collaborative inquiry, we could count on the perspectives of all of us in making sense of the educative process we observed. Ours was a collective effort from beginning to end.

TAKING A DESCRIPTIVE STANCE IN THE CLASSROOM

It was also clear to me that the classroom teachers at Prospect were the only staff in a position to make these regular observations of process, since it was they who were with the children all day, every day. My observations, and those of other staff, could supplement, but the backbone for the plan had to be the teachers' observations and records. The second teacher hired at Prospect—Jessica Howard—and I were the ones who tackled how this might happen. How could a teacher both teach and observe? How would she or he keep track of all that happened in a day? Were there formats that could support the teacher's efforts?

Process again proved the key word in working through these questions. The plan depended not merely on devising ingenious formats to guide teachers as observers and to systematize how they recorded their observations. Between us, we did devise and try out formats, changed them as circumstances changed—and then more often than not, once underway, discarded them as more hindrance than help. *The most important yield from our efforts was getting clear that observing is something a teacher is always doing all the time he or she is teaching.*

Rather than a paucity of observations, mostly teachers are surfeited by the end of the day with all that has happened. The question then became how to tap and give some order to these. What evolved from our experiments was indeed a layered enterprise, but one that, with hitches and lapses and periodic corrections of course, worked surprisingly well over many years.

According to this plan, each teacher worked out for her- or himself a way to keep daily track of children's choices of media, play and work partners, and so forth. At the end of the week, or on some other regular schedule, the teacher wrote four or five sentences for each child describing what the child did that week, with whom, and any other observations the teacher may have made. The standard for this writing was to be descriptive, which

meant, in practice, to stay clear of judgmental, evaluative language and as much as possible to include an illustrative example or two.

Although each weekly entry was brief, their cumulative weight and depth proved extraordinary. About 15 years after we initiated them, I had occasion to compile these records for 36 former Prospect students. On average, the teacher records, including the narrative report parents received twice yearly, and any Descriptive Reviews of the Child or other collateral pieces, *were 100 typed pages, single spaced.*

Alongside the daily choice lists and the weekly descriptive records, each teacher also devised other records: a way to keep track of a child's reading, mathematics, and other assignments; a way to maintain collections of children's works in the classroom; and ways to document the curriculum on a semester and yearly basis. These records took a variety of forms, but, as Jessica Howard and I discovered almost at the beginning, rather than formats and schedules, it was the ideas that mattered. As I saw it then (and now), the rationale for any longitudinal inquiry is the assumption that something continues and that paying attention to the continuation is going to yield knowledge that is not findable in isolation and in the short term.

For recording observations, *describe* played a companion role to attentiveness to process. The point of the Prospect plan for observing and recording was to build a layering narrative account, developed over time, of a child's learning or of the school's curriculum or of the school itself. It was by reflecting together on these narratives as the story unfolded over time and in relation to context that our understandings of where the child or the group was tending, and the meaning of what was happening, became visible.

Alongside the observing and the recordkeeping, the Descriptive Review of the Child and the entire family of descriptive processes were evolving: the Descriptive Review of Children's Works (visual art and writings of all kinds, constructions, etc.) as well as the Descriptive Reviews of Curriculum, of Teacher Practice, and of Issues. Connected to these were the Reflective Conversation and Recollections. Later, and in connection with public school teachers in a variety of locations, we developed the Descriptive Review of the Work and Art of Teaching, the Descriptive Review of Classroom Activities, and the Descriptive Review of a School.

These collaborative reviews conducted on a weekly, monthly, quarterly, or yearly basis were our way of making sense of all that we were gathering and recording. From these we collected the fruits of our inquiry and discovered the questions and leading edges—the moving force—that pointed the way ahead. I am surprised, looking back, at how quickly all this happened.

It was in this climate, and specifically as a way to learn from the children and to get to know them, that we began the practice of meeting each week for about an hour and a half to do a Descriptive Review of a Child.

This was a firmly held-to resolve. Other business didn't get done at these meetings. This was the time when we as a staff gave undivided attention to a particular child and to pooling our knowledge about that child.

THE DESCRIPTIVE REVIEW OF THE CHILD

It's a Tuesday after school. We are meeting in the staff room, which doubles as an adult library and study room for post–B.A. adult students enrolled in Prospect's Teacher Education Program (see Figure 1.1). While the staff and teacher education students are gathering, the chair for the review and the teacher who is primarily responsible for describing the child who is at the center of this particular descriptive review session are attending to last-minute details: laying out some of the child's drawings, writings, and constructions, and perhaps making an adjustment or addition to the focusing question for the review. Each of these roles, chair and presenting teacher, rotate from week to week among the staff, as does the role of note-taker, the staff member who keeps a record of main themes from the description of the child and the recommendations that are made as the descriptive review draws to a close.

As these last-minute arrangements between chair and presenting teacher suggest, the descriptive review that is about to happen already has a history.

FIGURE 1.1. Photograph of Staff Room.Library

Sometime in the preceding week, the chair and presenting teacher met to plan the review. With the chair acting as a listening ear, this was the opportunity for the presenting teacher to work through how she might focus the descriptive review for her colleagues and how she would organize her own portrayal of the child. For the portrayal, she would rely heavily on her daily and weekly records.

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

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

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

Since the presenting teacher and chair have decided on a reflection on a word to preface the review, the chair announces what that will be. Setting aside *visible/invisible* and *presence*, the presenting teacher has settled on *slip/slips* because it seems closer to how she experiences the child she is going to describe. The chair invites everyone in the review circle to write down words, images, and phrases that these words—*slip* or *slips*—call to mind. After we have had time to reflect on the word individually, each of us reads aloud

what we have written. The word surprises us, as words tend to do, with its variety and richness of meanings. Among these: slide, silk; silent or quiet; a whisper on the wind; slippage; slippery slope; an undergarment; sideways; to slip between, by, around, or into; a clay slip; to pass unnoticed; a space between; slight or small as in "slip of a girl." The chair pulls together clusters of these meanings, reminding us that we will *not apply* the reflection to the child; rather it will serve as surround and context for the picture of her that the presenting teacher will paint.

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

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

As the chair comes to the end of these framing comments, she calls attention to the procedure of the descriptive review, which has been circulated in advance to those who are unfamiliar with the process. The Descriptive Review of the Child is comprised of the following elements:

Reflection on a key word (this is optional)
The chair's framing remarks and the focus for the review
The presenting teacher's map of the classroom and description of the schedule
The presenting teacher's portrayal of the child, according to:

1. physical presence and gesture
2. disposition and temperament
3. connections with others (both children and adults)
4. strong interests and preferences
5. modes of thinking and learning.

The chair gathers main threads from the portrayal (also called "integrative restatment")
Additions to the presenting teacher's portrayal: observations by other staff
History of any significant illness, unusual absences, and so forth (very brief)
Chair restates the focus question(s) and invites questions and comments from the participants in the review
Questions, comments, dialogue
Chair gathers main themes from the discussion and restates the focus question
Responses and recommendations from the review group
Evaluation of process, with particular attention to respect for the child, the family, and the teacher
Plans and calendar for any upcoming descriptive reviews

She introduces the child we are going to review, giving the child's name and age, the names of family members and/or other caregivers, the length of time she has attended Prospect, and the multiage group in which she is currently enrolled. The chair reads the focusing question the presenting teacher and she have put together to frame the review.

With that preamble, the descriptive review is under way, and the presenting teacher takes over. She speaks briefly about the classroom setting, perhaps showing a map of the room and highlighting important features of the daily schedule. With this context established, she moves on to her description of the child, organized under the five headings that, though they have been revised and renamed over time, are the consistent framework for every Descriptive Review of the Child presentation:

1. Physical presence and gesture
2. Disposition and temperament
3. Connections with other people
4. Strong interests and preferences
5. Modes of thinking and learning

This portrayal of the child is the heart of the descriptive review. After a restatement of main themes by the chair, and any observations by other staff, the next large chunk of time is devoted to the review group's questions and other responses to what they have heard. All working together—chair, presenting teacher, staff members, and teacher education students—we inquire and, inquiring, add dimension and depth to the picture of the child. As new

insights emerge from this collaboration, the question the presenting teacher used to focus the review is illuminated by the perceptions and angles of viewing brought by the members of the descriptive review group. As the review comes to a close, the chair invites recommendations.

When these are completed, what remains on this Tuesday afternoon at Prospect is to evaluate the process: Did we respect the family, the child, and the teacher? How did we enact that respect? As we prepare to leave, we are already anticipating next Tuesday: Who has a child he or she wants to present? Who will be chair? Who will be note-taker?

For us at Prospect, these weekly descriptive reviews served us well in at least two ways. The first benefit was always to the child, since the child's particular teacher(s) left the meeting with fresh insights and expanded ideas for building on that child's capacities and strengths. The equal benefit was to us as a staff committed to children. By immersing ourselves weekly in one child's school life, that child became a lens to other children and to the school itself.

I don't mean that the child described became the caller of a tune for other children to dance to. Rather, the opposite. Looking closely at the one child exercised and sharpened our powers of observation, making us more keenly attuned to each child who came our way. The habit of observing and describing and pooling our knowledge and perspectives on a child made us disciplined students of childhood. The same habit gave substance and meaning to the claim of being centered on children as the context for educating.

This was perhaps our great advantage at Prospect. Starting from the commitment to examine our own practice, we were oriented from the first toward noticing, with a responsibility to record, reflect on, and describe these noticings. Starting from the idea of human capacity and possibility, widely distributed, we were oriented to look for and to particularize the capacities and strengths of each child. Starting from classroom settings rich in media and materials, we were in a position to see and make visible each child's strong interests and characteristic modes of engaging and learning. Committed to the long view and the child's growth over time, we were able to document these interests and modes of learning for as many as nine years of a child's school life.

PICTURE THIS . . .

On any day in the 1990s, a group of teachers, support staff, and administrators are meeting in a school to hold a Descriptive Review of the Child. Or, changing the venue and players, it is a group of parents and teachers meeting in an after-school collaborative inquiry group. Or it is a teacher cooperative group meeting at a teacher center or at one of the teacher's homes. Or it is a professional development class or a college seminar for women and men preparing to be teachers. Or it is a descriptive inquiry group convened at a local college to do a long-term study of adolescence or reading or mathematics. Or it is a Prospect conference or Summer Institute convened to teach descriptive inquiry and practice.

Listing these venues, I am mapping the spread of the Prospect descriptive processes across 30 years and a spectrum of actual locations, from New York City, Mamaroneck (New York), and Philadelphia to Boston, Ithaca (New York), Chicago, Grand Forks (North Dakota), and Phoenix. When Prospect's board, with a membership reflecting this spectrum, decided that after three decades of use and study the time was particularly *right* for wider publication of these processes, it was in relation to that spread. Looking across the span of locations where Prospect is a presence, the variety gave us confidence that the descriptive processes have achieved a sufficient thickness and toughness from years of dialogue and reworking to justify the decision to publish them more widely.

The time also seemed *right* because the ideas and values that center them are articulatable and accessible, as I think they were not even 10 years earlier. *Right* because for all the setbacks, the larger visions of human possibility that the descriptive processes promote and sustain are on the horizon even as, at the same time, there is mounting pressure for a national curriculum, for standardization, for sameness. *Right* because these processes can enact and translate into practice that vision of human possibility: a vision of children as complicated, interesting, and active in making some sense and meaning of the world and their own lives (for a full explication of these ideas, see Carini, in press).

This avenue of enactment and application that the descriptive processes provide is needed more than ever by the teachers, administrators, parents, and teacher educators who are struggling against the pressures for standardization.

To accomplish this, Prospect members across the country were alerted to tape any reviews of children for which they had permission, but especially those given by or for teachers and parents with little or no experience with descriptive processes. From this rich but unvarnished material, we selected three descriptive review stories. Making that selection, we were not looking for perfect reviews, flawlessly enacted. We wanted the children to be diverse in age. We wanted the locations of the reviews to be varied. We hoped for variety in terms of the focus for each review. We wanted these reviews to be what we call "starting-up stories," which by being that might inspire readers of this book to do and practice the kinds of observing and describing on which these stories hinge.

The first review is the story of Gabriel, age 7, from a public alternative elementary school in the Bronx. This review was held as part of a seminar offered by the Elementary Teachers Network in New York City for classroom teachers, all of whom, except for Gabriel's teacher, were new to the descriptive review process.

The second review is the story of Victoria, age 9, from a Philadelphia public school. This review was held during one of the Philadelphia Teachers Learning Cooperative's weekly Thursday meetings. Presenting such a review was a new experience for Victoria's teacher; the teachers participating in the review included many with extensive experience with the Descriptive Review of the Child.

The third story is the review of Nile, age 13, a ninth-grader at a public alternative high school in New York City. This concluding review happened as part of an Adolescent Study Group convened at Lehman College in which all participants, including the presenting teacher, had experience with the descriptive review processes.

The teachers who served as chairs for these three descriptive reviews were all experienced in that role.

The aim is to invite readers behind the scenes to join with the teachers who are the presenters or main storytellers for these reviews and with others participating in them. Through this behind-the-scenes look, through participating in what is a kind of guided tour through the process, readers are invited to learn how to think about and prepare to do this kind of review.

I have deliberately inserted here the language of *story*, and for several reasons. First of all, it was story as metaphor that freed us, the authors of this book, to think of ways to present the Descriptive Review of the Child process without reducing it to an outline or protocol. Then, developing story as we use it here, we tied it to rigorous observation and description, and in the telling of the story, to the use of ordinary language held to a standard of particularity and aptness.

It is story understood in this context of language that is vivid and particular to the child and securely grounded in observations which distinguishes the descriptive review from more clinical or psychological approaches; for example, the case study or developmental history or personality profile, as well as school evaluations in which the main purpose is to categorize or diagnose the child for referral to special services. This is an important distinction, and one that is explored in several essays in this book, but particularly in Chapters 3 and 7.

Each Descriptive Review of a Child that appears here is also understandable as a story from another slant: Each is a story of adults joining together in a spirit of collaborative inquiry in which the aim isn't to scrutinize or "solve" the child like a puzzle but to build from the child's capacities and strengths.

This story of circles of adults enacting descriptive reviews illustrates, by portraying it, how each person's perspectives and knowledge contribute to enlarge and complicate the story of each of these three children. This story also portrays how pooled knowledge assists teachers to make the changes in program and practice that are needed in order to support the child. Additionally, it is a story that tells by example how a constructed, disciplined conversation that keeps children at the center of thought and practice can be started by a group of teachers in any location who want to make that commitment.

The three descriptive reviews of Gabriel, Victoria, and Nile, enacted through edited transcribed tapes, are the heart of the book. Through this use of many voices and stories told in the voices of the persons closest to the child, we strive to show the underside of the tapestry, the working side, the side where all the knots and threads are visible. This choice means that rather than a seamless or transparent dramatization of the finished event, readers are in on the making of it.

To create other kinds of thinking space and to elaborate points touched on but not fully disclosed in the texts of the reviews, we have interspersed essays between the reviews. These are grouped in twos, each set offering the reader another angle for understanding how the descriptive review process works or the ideas and values at its root. There is also a progression across these pairs of essays.

Part I is comprised of the Gabriel review and a pair of essays that stay close to points of process. Chapter 3 tells how either a parent or teacher gathers and organizes her or his observations and knowledge for a descriptive review presentation. Chapter 4 is the story of two teachers choosing a child for a descriptive review and putting the review together.

Part II is comprised of the Victoria review and a pair of essays that explore description as method. Chapter 6 deepens the discussion of what it is to describe and to inquire through describing by referring to the phenomenological roots of the project processes and by taking a close look at how language works in them. Chapter 7 introduces the reader to an extensive literature in which teachers from the Prospect membership draw on their observations to write textured and layered stories of life in the classroom.

Part III is comprised of the Nile review and a pair of essays that illustrate descriptive processes at work in school and program settings. Chapter 9 tells how a year-long, schoolwide descriptive inquiry moved along a staff's understanding of what it means to commit to heterogeneity as a value and describes the politics of enacting that commitment. Chapter 10 tells by example and story how disciplined description and oral inquiry serves democratic aims.

The Appendix at the end of the book contains a list of resources available from The Prospect Center, including locations nationwide where Pros-

pect work is happening and information about board members, conferences, institutes, and the Archives. A reader eager to do further reading of works published by Prospect-connected teachers will find an extensive bibliography, too, collated by Karen Woolf.

We, the authors (and there are a lot of us!), invite you to join actively in these descriptive processes, the philosophy that frames them, and the discipline of taking a descriptive stance.

PART I

LEARNING THE DISCIPLINE OF DESCRIPTION

We invite you to the first descriptive review, which took place in a taught by the Elementary Teachers Network (ETN) in New York Cit spring of 1996. The presenting teacher is Karen Khan, a K–1 teache Bronx New School who had some prior experience with Prospect pr The other teachers in the review group were brand-new to the pr Typical of newcomers, they were at first awed by Karen's knowl Gabriel and her ability to describe him so fully to them. Then, slow came to recognize how the processes draw on knowledge and ability teachers always already have. With that dawning recognition, they pr from finding the review "incredible" to understanding its value in th day-to-day demands of teaching. This shift in perspective is discuss essay we asked Elaine Avidon and Mary Hebron, who taught the ETN to write in lieu of presenting edited transcripts from the questions a ommendations section of this review.

After the review, in Chapter 3, you will find a letter Patricia F wrote several years ago as a guide for assisting teachers and paren ested in learning how to describe children by using the five heading descriptive review. She offers concrete and specific suggestions for bering the child, for gathering impressions and images together, for c together story and observation. This letter is often used by expe teachers who are helping teachers new to the process learn how to for a review.

Chapter 4, by Betsy Wice, documents how an experienced teache with" a teacher new to the processes in preparing for a review. A l member of the Prospect network, Betsy had volunteered to chair for h and colleague, Cheryl. Using transcripts from those planning sessio revisits the work she and Cheryl did together. Her chapter illustra preparing for a review—that is, how learning the discipline of descri makes the child more visible as a full and complex person through guage the teachers develop in their efforts to do justice to that com