

MADE BY HAND by Patricia Carini

[The following essay is taken from remarks made at the University of Vermont for a workshop with the Vermont Writing Project in March 2007.]

Welcome to the Prospect Archives, a recent gift from Prospect to UVM and now housed at Special Collections, Bailey/Howe Library. Today's workshop focuses on one dimension of these archives, the Collections of Children's Works, with hopes that this opportunity to explore these collections, spanning as much as 9 years of a child's school life, will whet your appetite for more.

Besides the collections of children's works, the Prospect Archives includes many other categories of papers: the institutional records of Prospect School and Center, including slides, photographs, and films; documentations of Prospect School classrooms and of the school as a whole; documentation of the Prospect School curriculum (including reading); documentations of its post-BA Teacher Education Program and of conferences, summer institutes, and other seminars for experienced teachers.

(Prospect School: the collections in context)

The Prospect School was started in 1965 by me, my husband Lou, Joan B. Blake, and the founding teacher, Marion Stroud. The single largest influence on the school at its inception was John Dewey's philosophy, and specifically, his commitment to the active agency of the learner and his conviction that the desire for learning is inherent in every child. Tragically, the school, always financially precarious, was forced to close in 1991. Prospect Center, however, continues as the hub of consultations, conferences, institutes, and publications reflecting its philosophy. Former teachers from Prospect have founded schools continuous with Prospect's mission and vision: The Hiland Hall School in Shaftsbury, Vermont and River Rock School in Montpelier.

What made it possible for Prospect School to happen in 1965 was a confluence of circumstances and serendipities. It was serendipitous that Marion Stroud, who had at that time been teaching for some 13 years in England, was newly arrived in this country bringing with her a developed practice rooted in the British infant schools. It was serendipitous that as our ideas for what a school might look like were brewing that funding for such ventures was in the wings, and even happening. Ours involved a small piece of a grant from the Ford Foundation followed by a far larger federal grant under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. It was fortunate that at that time there were persons in positions of authority in the Bennington Schools and at the State Education Dept who welcomed our overtures, including the aim to become a wing of the public schools, and who assisted us in our efforts to find funding.

Politics changed in Bennington and Prospect School never did become a wing of the Bennington public schools. It did, though, continue for 26 years, and for all those years stayed true to its dedication to public education and to admission of students from all walks of life, even when federal funding was no longer available. What this commitment means is that the child collections maintained by the school are not those of a hand-picked population of children, chosen for their artistic or other talents. These are children representative of the communities surrounding the school.

Prospect's characteristics as a school reflected its philosophy. Children were not grouped by grade but in multiage classes that spanned several years; e.g., 4 1/2 - 7; 7 - 9 or 10; 10 or 11 through 14. Learning, rather than teaching or achievement, was its first priority and its aim. Each day included a choice or activity time for children to explore a wide range of materials and to make things from them. Instruction in skill areas was typically individual or in small groups and in response to a child's preferred modes of learning. The school's curriculum in significant degree emerged from children's interests, questions, and the works they made.

(collecting works, a history)

Observing children making things and keeping what was left in school began in a casual way in the first year of the school. As the original "keeper" I was prompted to do so by the children's overwhelming productivity, their ingenuity in turning the materials to hand to serve their purposes, and the intensity of their engagement. In 1983 when, with funding from the Noyes and Bush Foundations, we began the massive task of creating a *Reference Edition* of the Prospect Archives, we quickly learned what all that productivity yielded. It was not atypical for a child's collection, spanning 5 to 9 years -- and exclusive of large quantities of work that were taken home -- to include over a thousand items, and teachers' narrative records to number, when typed single-spaced, a hundred pages.

The completed *Reference Edition*, published in 1985, includes the full collections of 36 children on microfiche, with a subset of the works on colored slides, and teachers' narrative records and a catalogue for each child's collection in typescript. For some of the children there is also a pamphlet of selected writings, also in typescript.

The works collected included anything a child made, constructed, wrote, including, but not limited to, drawings; paintings; collage; sculpture; sewing; block, wood, lego and junk constructions; photographs and films; stories, poems, reports, essays, the occasional novel, and informational writing. When I say "not limited to," I am referring to masking tape, staples, glue, twine, string, aluminum foil, dirt, snow, twigs, vines, cones, nuts, stones, flowers and

so much more that I have seen commandeered by children intent on “making and doing” turn to their own purposes.

As a staff, we knew from fairly early on that these works told something important about children and about humanness more generally, though a process for looking at the works reflectively and descriptively was not securely in place until the 70s. There were reasons for that delay. I and other staff were uneasy about the heavily psychological interpretations quite typically imposed on children’s drawings and writing. We weren’t interested in using the works to measure intelligence or to categorize children according to personality types or a developmental stage. Still, our caution about not imposing these kinds of schemas on the works didn’t stop us from looking at the works and appreciating them.

Since we met as a staff weekly to describe individual children, using a process that came to be called the Descriptive Review of the Child, a child’s works were quite often brought in as illustrations of her interests and capacities. We also sometimes assembled the works, especially the visual pieces, by motifs, such as drawings of houses, trees, suns or of battles or dinosaurs. We did this with the aim of learning what these recurrent images allowed children to explore, and the spectrum these created across media and through the ways different children handled and interpreted them. We learned a lot from this actually. For example, we were able to glimpse how differently individual children handled and interpreted these popular and recurrent images. We learned, too, that for all the many drawings children make of, for example, houses, trees and suns, and contrary to our expectations, no two were the same. We discovered, too, that any one child’s repertoire of these common elements wasn’t nearly as repetitive as we had judged them to be before we paused to take a really close look.

It was at that juncture, that Beth Alberty, a curator with an art history background, crossed Prospect’s path. When I showed Beth the collections of works, and talked with her about my hunch that each child’s works were distinctive, she suggested that instead of organizing the works by theme, we regroup the collections by child. It was a fateful move. Seeing a child’s collection assembled chronologically, spanning several or more years, it was observable that amidst all the changes associated with age and expanding influences, a continuousness across time and media remained. This was intriguing. If we could track that continuousness in harness with the changes across a collection of works from age 4 or 5 to age 13 or 14 these might provide an important lens to the maker as a thinker, learner and person.

With that aim to guide us, the process we will use today in the small group sessions was drafted and subsequently reworked over a period of years leading up to and including the creation of the *Reference Edition*. Called the Descriptive Review of Children’s Works, its aims are straightforward: to use

description, as free of evaluative judgments as possible, to make the work more visible, and to let the maker shine through.

(Descriptive Review of Children's Works: the process)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Following the impressions, the chair introduces the first round of description by distinguishing description from impressions. In brief, when describing I am obligated to ground what I say back to the work itself. For example, I might observe that the most often used color in a painting is orange - and then point to the many places it appears. Or, I might say, there are three

main elements in a drawing: what appears to be a dog (or some kind of animal), a child, and a hill - indicating these elements as I speak.

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

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

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

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

Ambiguities

Compositional and stylistic aspects: the use of space, the rhythm, the aesthetic

Patterns and images arising from the work.

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

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

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

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

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

(a way of looking)

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

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

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

There has been in the past quarter century and more an extraordinary medicalization of the schools. As if in a clinic, children are diagnosed, assigned to a category, and treated - not infrequently with drugs. Observing is often driven by the search for evidence that will make the case that a child is ADHD or suffers from character disorder, or any of a big bundle of other diagnostic classifications. There are specialist committees that meet to decide the child's treatment sometimes without with minimal if any opportunity for the teacher to offer her picture of the child. The assumption driving this activity is that it is the teacher's job, the school's job to "fix" the child so she will better fit the school mold. In the process, the child herself is too often lost from view.

The way of looking that is the foundation for Prospect's descriptive processes with its aims at fullness and balance contradicts this trend. The descriptive processes, whatever else they may accomplish, make a space for suspending these habits of snap judgments, classification, and assigning of labels. They make a space for stepping away from a vocabulary of deficiency. Positively, they create a space for discovering a vocabulary particular to a child

and a child's work that is both apt and vivid, and so to restore to view the child as she is -- a lively presence, with capacities and strengths to be counted upon.

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

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

I have watched this in action for many years. Often these groups are formed and meet across schools. Sometimes teachers within a school form such a group. Right now, I am a member of a group that meets monthly in Bennington that draws teachers from several Vermont locations, western Massachusetts, and neighboring New York State. Several such groups meet on a regular basis in New York City. The Philadelphia Teachers Learning Cooperative has been meeting across schools each Thursday since 1979. I could offer other examples, and it may be that ways of forming such groups will be something we want to talk more about after the descriptive review sessions and over lunch.

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

Patricia F. Carini is a co-founder of Prospect School (1965-1991) and Prospect Archives and Center for Education and Research (1979-present) in North Bennington, Vermont. At Prospect, she developed observational, descriptive processes for study of children and their works and the documentation of schools. For more than 40 years, she has introduced these processes, and a philosophy rooted in the child's desire and capacity to learn, to educators

throughout the country. Her most recent book is *Starting Strong, A Different Look at Children, Schools, and Standards* (2001).