Teachers Looking Closely at Students and Their Work

Steve Seidel of Harvard University's Project Zero describes what happened when he and ten teachers at the Fuller School in Gloucester, Massachusetts, came together for four mornings to think about a few poems and stories that the teachers brought with them from their classrooms:

We started by looking and we dwelled on what we saw. As we looked more, we saw more and, in turn, we became more interested. Interest kept us looking and, as even more was revealed to us, we became amazed. Through all of this we deepened our appreciation of the complexity of the tasks undertaken by these children and the significance of their accomplishments. In short, we felt respect.

All this made us want to meet the children, to get to know them, to ask them questions and hear their answers, to tell them what confused us and delighted us and what it made us wonder about. We wanted to learn from them and to help them in their learning. We wanted to look at the work of other children, too.1

This issue of Changing Minds is about a kind of teacher inquiry that focuses close attention on individual students and individual examples of student work. It is about looking closely, and often collabora-


...tively, at one child, one poem, one example of mathematical reasoning; it is about teachers spending hours that most feel they could not possibly afford talking about an individual child or piece of work. It is about a kind of work that most of us have never done. And because it is about patient, painstaking looking, the issue itself has a different structure: The articles are longer (and there are, in consequence, fewer of them) in order to give both the texture and the substance of these efforts at close examination.

The pace, volume, and complexity of the work of teaching put a premium on efficiency; they militate against both careful looking and conversation. Yet teachers who make a regular and important place in their professional lives for this kind of work testify that it nourishes both their practice and their souls.

Seidel and other teachers help us to see some of the reasons this is true.

The Fruits of Taking Time

First of all, what teachers learn from careful looking and listening can feed their teaching in immediate and concrete ways. As fourth-grade teacher Liz Sweeney writes in Investigating Jack's Thinking:2

My content preparation for the math lesson serves me well, but the key piece for "teaching" lies in the ability to listen. The students discuss ideas and make meaning for themselves as they

2 All children's names in Changing Minds are pseudonyms.
struggle with mathematics. "Teaching," in some ways then, becomes the critical task of asking the "next right question," and without listening to student thinking, whether in classroom discussions or written work, it seems to be impossible to know what that might be.

Sweeney's formulation reminds us of that principal, teacher, and activist Deborah Meier says she has discovered in the course of her work that "teaching is mostly listening and learning is mostly telling." Any approach to teaching that focuses on students' thinking requires that teachers pay close attention to students' ideas. Often, however, children describe their thinking in oblique and confusing ways; in order to see all that is there, a teacher must listen far more actively and intently than most of us are accustomed to doing. Sweeney attends closely in order to figure out how her students are making sense of the mathematics they are engaged with. The understandings she gains as she investigates their thinking direct her next teaching moves.

Like Seidel, Sweeney finds that close study of a child's thinking pays off in a second way: careful attention deepens her respect for children's intellectual accomplishments:

Jack is a sweet kid and is almost always disorganized. At the beginning of the year I found it hard to listen to him; it always seemed like he was rambling and I never expected to be able to make sense of what he was saying.... However, in recent years I have learned to listen hard for the ideas my students are trying to express, and when I persevered, I found that listening to Jack offered unexpected rewards. He has good mathematical insights.

Discussions of schooling include a lot of easy talk about the importance of respecting children. But, as David Hawkins explains in his seminal essay on the critical role subject matter can play in the relationship of teacher and child, "To have respect for children is more than recognizing their potentialities in the abstract, it is also to seek out and value their accomplishments - however small these may be by the standards of adults."

Hawkins argues that robust substantive respect is possible only when teachers have opportunities to see a child engage with the world in ways that reveal a bit about her ideas and her approach to the world. In Learning to Look we listen as ten Gloucester teachers conduct a Collaborative Assessment Conference focused on a child's poem. The teachers follow a protocol that requires them to spend considerable time describing what they see on the page in quite literal terms - preferring, for example, "I see a roughly two-inch diameter circle of yellow surrounded by blue which covers the entire top half of the paper," to "I see a sun in the sky" - before moving into questions, interpretations, pedagogical considerations, or even identification of the author or assignment. As one observation builds on another we ourselves see far more in the poem they are examining than we did at first. Our respect for its author grows as we appreciate the complexity of her accomplishment.

Teachers describe a third dividend to hard listening and close looking: when the teacher pays close attention to children's writing, or to their mathematical thinking, other students follow suit. Sweeney notes, "It has turned out that as I listen hard and take what Jack is saying seriously, so do his classmates. His relationship to them has changed since the fall."

Such a change has implications for the quality of everyday life, for the moral and social growth of students, and for the classroom learning community. It has an intellectual payoff as well. Many of the "jacks" of this world - and we find them in every school - have ideas that would challenge the thinking of other students if anyone listened to them. In the kind of pedagogy proposed in recent years by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, classroom conversation about mathematically meaty problems becomes a major tool for developing students' thinking: students learn mathematical reasoning by doing it, by explaining their own thinking.

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and by attempting to follow and evaluate the reasoning of others. But a discussion offers few opportunities for critical thinking if students accept unquestioningly solutions offered by classmates who sound "smart" and dismiss those presented by less prestigious children. In order to learn to reason mathematically, they need to learn to listen to all of their classmates with curiosity and openness.

Fourth, close thoughtful investigation of children's texts provides aesthetic rewards. Just as a classroom microscope reveals astonishing visual riches in a strand of hair or a drop of water, so close attention can expose fascinating complexities in a child's writing. As we join British teacher and headmaster Michael Armstrong in examining six-year-old Jessica Orr's *The Poorly Mouse* (see *The Leap of Imagination*), we feel the power of Jessica's story in a way that only time and close attention can make possible.

Looking hard at children can yield similar pleasures. MSU junior J. L. Levi's floor-length portrait of four-year-old Matt drawing a picture ("What color are birds?") allows us to appreciate the special character of Matt's deep engagement with the task he has selected and the deliberate way in which he develops his drawing.

Fifth, by looking carefully we educate ourselves as the audience for student work. Armstrong's analysis of *The Poorly Mouse* makes this point dramatically:

> "Once there was a mouse who lived near where the wolves lived." The language is chaste but full of menace in the context of the fairy tale. The written text goes on to provide the brute facts: "One day a wolf came out of its home and hurt the mouse." It is the pictured text which on this particular page colours and elaborates the narrative [see p. 34]. A bold sun between tall trees outlines the wood in the middle of which the tiny mouse is at play.

Meanwhile, from the edge of the page, a wolf's head, emerging from its lair, surveys the scene: eye, nose and jagged teeth in a head already larger than the mouse itself—threat made visible on the page.

In exposing the richness of Jessica's text, Armstrong encourages us to look harder at other primary grade writing—and shows us a bit about how such looking might be done.

Teachers are the primary audience for most student work. They read and respond to it, perhaps assigning it a grade, a sticker, or a smiley face. They decide whether a story gets a larger audience—does it go up on the class bulletin board or home to the refrigerator? Does it get read from the Author's Chair? A teacher who reads a poem through three times, wondering about the author's intent, provides a very different audience from a teacher who can only talk about punctuation errors. But few people know how to investigate a child's text, or even how to see more on a second reading than they saw on the first; in order to act as a shrewd and curious audience, we have to learn to read children's work.

**Collaborative Looking and Conversation**

Important and rewarding as it may be to listen carefully to children and to study their poems, stories, and drawings, few teachers can sustain this kind of work alone. Most of the work we describe here is collaborative: it involves conversation. And there are special additional benefits that teachers say they get from doing this sort of work with others.

To begin with, conversation and collaborative work provide a place to learn the skills of observation and description. As Steve Seidel (Learning to Look) realized when he tried to involve teachers who were using an experimental playwriting curriculum in conversations about the scenes their students had written, teachers ordinarily get very little practice describing student work. The demands of their jobs favor expeditious evaluation. Because they have had neither the need nor the leisure for painstaking observation, few teachers have developed the relevant skills. Seidel's first Collaborative Assessment Conference with the Gloucester teachers shows us that describing without evaluating is unnatural work requiring practice and self-discipline. "It's very creative and off-beat," volunteers one teacher; "The drawing is more sophisticated than the writing," another concludes; "How old is the writer?" a third asks. A rich description of the picture story "Adam is for Apples" ultimately emerges, but only because the teachers and Seidel continue to struggle against the grain of habit. Working together, they construct a space for learning a highly productive sort of talk.

The descriptive processes developed by Patricia Carini and colleagues at the Prospect Center in Vermont create another context for practicing observation and description. In "I Knowed That Before You Said It," Claire Batt uses the five headings of the Descriptive Review—Physical Presence and Gesture, Disposition, Connections with Other Children and Adults, Preferences and Abiding Interests, and Modes Of Thinking And Learning—to organize the portrait of her student Keith that she presents to her colleagues. The headings, the positive focus of the Descriptive Review process, and the summaries of David Carroll who chairs the Review ensure that the picture of Keith that emerges from the Review goes well beyond what even this gifted teacher could see alone. Dirck Roosevelt, a teacher educator at MSU and former principal of Prospect School, asserts that as teachers (or prospective teachers) participate in reviews they develop the vocabulary they need in
order to describe children and their work with precision and respect: the vocabulary and the skills grow out of the process itself. We see this happening in "I Knew That Before You Said It" and in the child study written by Roosevelt's student J.L. Levi, "What Color Are Birds?"

Working together in this way creates opportunities for several kinds of learning: joint work shows participants the value of observation and description; it enables them to see more and thus to feel — and be — more successful; it creates opportunities to learn from listening to more experienced describers.

Listening as the Fuller School teachers draw attention to what they see as they examine "Adam is for Apples" (p. 9), we see more and more of what its author has put into this one-page work.

"The stars are going around him. It’s like this circular..."

"The apple is huge. It’s ten times the size of either person."

"It is two colored in an interesting way. It’s brown and red, but instead of being brown and red in the way you would think many children would do it, with a brown part and a whole red part, the red almost looks as if it was second thought after he started doing the brown."

"It looks like he’s dancing on the stem. He’s actually tip-toeing on the stem of the apple. It’s almost as though he is doing a little balancing act there. And then the figure below is almost dancing."

"One character is all colored in. The other one is not."

"It’s as if the stars are framing the apple... there are two-color stars, too."

Participants put aside worries about the quality of their observation — is it obvious, insignificant, or dumb? — more readily because the point is to describe rather than to analyze, evaluate, or interpret. There is "room" for everyone’s ob-

Many observations, in calling attention to a formerly invisible aspect of the text, prompt questions. Ideas emerge from layers of description. Listening, looking, wondering, and describing all feed one another.

Participants learn about the power of describing. They also learn what it looks and sounds like — and thus how to do it. Group investigations like the collaborative Assessment Conference and the Descriptive Review create opportunities for an apprenticeship in which more experienced and less experienced teachers work side by side and the less experienced learn both from their own efforts and from observing and reflecting on the moves of skilled colleagues.

As teachers we sometimes come when they are examined from other angles. A Lansing teacher encountered Descriptive Review for the first time when she was debating the advisability of following her first grade class into the second grade. She saw many potential benefits to spending an extra year with these youngsters, but she had one student who really got under her skin and she won-

- looking at student work
- wondering
- describing student work
- listening to others describe student work

- to the end of our resources in dealing with a particular student or problem of practice. Our way of seeing, our tools for reaching children or for managing dilemmas, are insufficient to this challenge. Some problems are truly intractable. Others, however, actually disappear...
him," she recalled a year later. Her colleagues had listened as she described the little boy, using the Descriptive Review headings. "They helped me to see that things he did that felt hostile to me were actually the opposite—he really wanted my approval." In the weeks following the Review, this little boy became an eager and successful class member. And the following year he was a major addition to the second grade.

Often a teacher needs this sort of help in seeing a child from a new angle more than she needs new strategies for teaching him to read or for managing his behavior. Dirck Roosevelt, in Teaching as Acts of Attention, argues that these changes in perspective are the most frequent and valuable fruit of the Descriptive Review process. And teachers who have participated in many Reviews suggest that these changes can begin even before the Review: many teachers say that they take time to observe a child in a new way when they prepare for a Review and that this new kind of attention—even when the child is not consciously aware of it—often benefits their relationship with him or her.

The connection between rich description and the sorts of structured conversation created by Collaborative Assessment Conference or Descriptive Review runs both ways. The conversations create a context for learning to observe and describe; the emphasis on beginning with description builds a strong foundation for continuing conversation. Participants can agree more easily on description than on interpretation. And the task of describing children and children's work can nurture good sorts of conversation among faculties that disagree painfully about pedagogy and policy. Rhoda Kanevsky, who has been doing Descriptive Reviews with other teachers in the Philadelphia Teachers' Learning Cooperative for almost 20 years, recalls the effect of bringing descriptive processes into her own school. We did Descriptive Reviews in my school during a period when we were having difficulty talking about some hard issues. We did them two different times and everyone loved it. It was a moment when teachers spoke to each other in a different way and there was common ground in a different sense. The structure made it comfortable for everyone and put the focus back on concerns we all share.6

Conversation is Fundamental to School Change

Although in fact teaching requires ongoing inquiry and continual re-examination of complex and often conflicting ideas, most of the organizing structures and daily routines of schooling seem to declare that teaching is about managing children, routines, and paperwork. On the other hand, conversations shaped by the Collaborative Assessment Conference protocols or the Prospect Center guidelines for descriptive processes validate the ideas that teaching is an intellectual activity and that focused teacher talk generates new knowledge. They do this in several ways. First, as David Carroll and Pat Carini point out, these conversations draw on the kind of knowledge that teachers are uniquely positioned to generate: "[Teachers] can note subtle patterns and continuities that persons outside the classroom, however knowledgeable they may be about children, simply cannot observe."7 Second, they protect a time for such conversations and, in doing so, validate the notion that teachers talking together can produce valuable knowledge. Third, they provide teachers with an appreciative audience for their observations and ideas. The responses of others to our ideas—the images of ourselves we see reflected in the eyes of friends and colleagues—can teach us to respect our own thinking—or not.

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The changes in teaching recommended by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and other groups committed to reforms that take children's thinking seriously require a teaching force of men and women who see themselves as thinkers, who are confident of the power of their own minds as well as those of the students in their charge. If we are to hold such teachers in the profession, we must create settings that support their identities as intellectuals and provide opportunities for them to think with others about the challenges of their work. ■


Learning to Look: Collaborative Assessment Conferences in the Staffroom and the Classroom

Liz Parillo passes out xeroxed copies "Beautiful Butterfly" to the group gathered round the table in the Fuller School in Gloucester, Massachusetts. The eleven teachers read silently. After a few minutes Steve Seidel, the facilitator of today's Collaborative Assessment Conference, calls for observations and descriptions.

"It's an acrostic," comments kindergarten teacher Alyce McMenimen.

Several of the teachers - including Parillo herself - gasp their surprise.

"What made you realize that?" Seidel asks McMenimen.

"It was the word 'unhappy.' I wondered why it was there: it seemed like such a happy poem. And then I saw..."

One by one, participants point out aspects of the work that have struck them: "I noticed that 'Caterpillar' was capitalized and butterfly wasn't." "Four lines begin with 'ing' words - 'Turning,' 'Telling,' 'Flying,' 'Living.'"

A teacher raises a question about the poet's voice: who is speaking in the first lines - is it the first person butterfly or line five, or someone else? Those sitting around the big table reflect on the apparent change in point of view and wonder at the young author's intent. Then Cheryllann Parker who, like Parillo, teaches third and fourth graders, comments on the symmetry of the drawing that frames the poem.

Turning from her xeroxed copy to the original, McMenimen notices an interesting erasure: "The sixth line was changed: at first it said, 'Rain comes down and the butterfly goes home.' Then he - or she - erased that and wrote, 'Rain comes down and I go home.'" McMenimen's discovery turns the group's attention away from the illustration and back into the text of the poem.

Conducting a Collaborative Assessment

Because the ten Fuller School teachers and Steve Seidel, a researcher from Harvard University's Project Zero, are following the protocols for a Collaborative Assessment Conference (CAC), no one in the room except Liz Parillo knows which of her third and fourth grade students wrote "Beautiful Butterfly." The CAC protocols specify that those examining a piece of writing will come to it without any of the information about author and assignment that a teacher would ordinarily provide. Those using the protocols for the first time usually find this situation unnatural and uncomfortable. As one of the Fuller School teachers asked in an early meeting, "When do we ever read a child's work without knowing the identity of the author?"

Seidel believes that this anonymity is vitally important, however. He traces this conviction back to the 1980s and work he did with a group of Pittsburgh teachers who were using a new play writing curriculum. The teachers spoke enthu-

"Through successive meetings, we found that the more we opened the discussion of the students works with descriptions of what was striking us, the more complex and intriguing the texts became to us."

Seidel, who was at the time teaching play writing in the Boston Public Schools, was "impressed, entertained, and intrigued" by the student-written scenes that the Pittsburgh teachers brought to these meetings. He wondered why the teachers themselves were so unhappy with their students' writing. He did, however, have a theory about why their colleagues responded critically. He suspected that the remarks that teachers made as they passed out the work they were presenting were shaping the responses of the other readers: "This kid is a real joker," he remembered one teacher saying, "I brought this because I think he's got potential but he's always clowning around."

Hoping to shift the readers' attention from the writer to the text, Seidel asked group members to refrain from saying anything at all as they distributed their student's work. But although this prohibition did seem to change the conversa-
tion, it did not improve it:

We still were not getting to a reading of the texts that revealed the energy, experimentation, accomplishments that I felt I could see in the work of these novice dramatists. We certainly weren't getting to investigations of the writer's intentions or the meaning we made of their texts.

Like most people responding to a work of art, the teachers leapt immediately into evaluations of the text and observations about what they liked and disliked, often without even giving reasons for their judgments.

So Seidel added a second directive to the first: he asked that, during the first part of the conference, all participants in the conversation focus on describing the text in front of them and abstain from assessing its quality or saying what they liked or disliked about it. No one — including Seidel — found following these rules easy. Nonetheless, the teachers and Seidel persevered and their efforts to conduct these somewhat unnatural conversations paid off. As Seidel explains:

Through successive meetings, we found that the more we opened the discussion of the students' works with descriptions of what was striking to us, the more complex and intriguing the texts became to us. Our conversations lengthened. We began to have more questions about the works and fewer quick answers.

In addition, the teachers and the Project Zero staff began to make discoveries inside the text, and to connect details that had at first seemed insignificant. They found that describing what they saw in precise language — preferring "I see a roughly two-inch diameter circle of yellow surrounded by blue which covers the entire top half of the paper," to "I see a sun in the sky" — enabled them to see more and more.

The Fuller School teachers, who are meeting today for the third time, are beginning to feel their way into this kind of conversation about "Beautiful Butterfly".

The Necessity of Metamorphosis

"I feel a lot of sadness in this poem," observes special education teacher Nancy Rhodes.

"Yes," McMenimen agrees, "the completing her first year of teaching, connects Rhodes' suggestions of sadness and isolation to her own questions about the writer. "I tried to look at this two ways," she explains. "I tried looking at it thinking I knew the identity of the child, which I don't. And in a way I'm glad I didn't... So then I asked: 'Is this a desperate cry or is the child wishing to attain new heights?' I think it would be so easy to answer that if you knew the history of the child. And I sort of like not knowing."

"Which interpretation makes words 'unhappy' stood out for me the first time I read it through."

"I see no connections," Rhodes continues. "There are no relationships: 'I sing myself a song. 'Flying above the clouds. . . .'"

Ellen Sibley, who is just completing her first year of teaching, connects Rhodes' suggestions of sadness and isolation to her own questions about the writer. "I tried to look at this two ways," she explains. "I tried looking at it thinking I knew the identity of the child, which I don't. And in a way I'm glad I didn't... So then I asked: 'Is this a desperate cry or is the child wishing to attain new heights?' I think it would be so easy to answer that if you knew the history of the child. And I sort of like not knowing."

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"I see no connections," Rhodes continues. "There are no relationships: 'I sing myself a song. 'Flying above the clouds. . . ."
returns to the issue of voice. “Usually I’m looking for the writer’s voice, but now I’m hearing the reader’s voice. And I’m listening for shifting meaning. I’m hearing very different meanings than I heard in it before.”

“What do you hear?” asks Carter.

“I think it’s about the necessity of metamorphosis,” answers Parker slowly. “Unhappy as a caterpillar means she is struggling to become something. And, once she becomes it, she goes out like the good Samaritan.”

“There’s a way of looking at children’s work as a teacher where your role is to help the child say what he or she wants to say as a writer,” muses Annette Boothroyd. “And there is a way of looking at work as a reader where how it hits you is more important because that is the final result of the writing. So there are really two ways of looking at it: looking at it as a teacher, there’s a different kind of responsibility to that than there is to looking at it as a reader.”

Three Key Ideas

As David Allen, Tina Blythe, and Barbara Powell of Project Zero explain in A Guide to Looking Collaboratively at Student Work, three ideas undergird the Collaborative Assessment Conference and give it its current shape. First, students use school assignments to tackle problems that are important to them. Although these problems sometimes connect to those the teacher had in mind when she assigned the work, often they do not. Second, we will not understand the students’ serious purposes unless we suspend judgments long enough to look hard at what is really in that work—rather than what is not. And third, the perspectives of other people—particularly other teachers—who are not immersed in our particular instructional goals can help us to see what is actually in students’ work and to use what we have learned from careful looking to reshape our teaching.

Seidel sees his own experiences in theater as a key influence on his work in assessment and, in particular, on his conviction that multiple perspectives can enrich the reading of a text. Noting that the traditional curriculum of his own high school had bored and alienated him, he observes that “in acting classes and play rehearsals, I found a way of working and learning that was as gratifying as my high school experience was alienating.”

In retrospect, Seidel notices a connection between the rehearsal process and the Collaborative Assessment Conference: “In both, a group of people come together in a room to examine a text from every possible angle and then to attempt to understand what the author’s intentions were and what meanings the text has for each of them.”

His own experiences as a high school theater and language arts teacher also, of course, shaped his thinking. He sums these up by quoting Sid Freedman, a theater teacher he interviewed many years ago. Freedman, who had experimented with many different techniques for teaching acting earlier in his career, explained that he no longer looked to the theories and techniques of others for guidance. “I look at what is front of me in that room, teaching me what I need to know,” he explained, adding that he suspected that if he could keep his attention focused on his students and the work they were doing on the playwright’s text, he might enter an entirely new phase of inquiry into “the center of acting.”

For four years, both in the Pittsburgh project and elsewhere, Seidel and his colleagues at Project Zero worked with teachers on portfolio assessment of student work. As this work progressed Seidel became more and more concerned about the difficulties that many teachers seemed to have in articulating descriptions of their students’ work. When he examined the research on portfolio assessment he found no systematic attention to this problem, no effort to look at the ways teachers’ reading of student work might change over time.

Stepping into the breach, Seidel designed a dissertation study of one group of elementary school teachers and their work with Collaborative Assessment in a workshop setting. He planned to meet with the teachers five times over the course of two and a half months and to try to answer two questions:

What are the evolving difficulties, accomplishments, and new challenges participants experience as they engage in the exercise of clinical assessment skills in observing, describing, interpreting and deciding upon pedagogical responses?

What changes occur in participants’ ideas about the purpose and practice of assessing student work and, in turn, about teaching?

The Fuller School teachers enthusiastically agreed to participate in the study.

Adam is for Apples

At the group’s first meeting, the teachers encountered the CAC protocols for the first time and ran head on into the difficulties of describing without interpreting. After the group had spent about a minute looking silently at “Adam is for Apples,” the piece of writing Seidel had brought to launch the session, Seidel suggested that they start by describing some aspect of what they saw on the page in front of them.

“How old is the child?” Boothroyd inquired after a moment of silence.

“I’ll answer that question later,” Seidel replied, “but for now let’s stick to describing what we see.”

“Can you read the word that is
under the ‘A?’ Parillo asked.

“Yes,” Wilmot agreed, “I can’t read that.”


“Okay,” Parillo nodded and the group fell silent.

“Okay, any time. . .” Seidel began after the hush had stretched out for a full minute.

“It raises a million questions,” Boothroyd observed.

“Start with description,” Seidel suggested. “Just describe any aspect of what you see.”

“It’s very creative and offbeat,” Boothroyd commented.

“It’s a Bart Simpson-type boy,” added McMenimen.

“Yeah,” Parker agreed. “The drawing is more sophisticated than the writing.”

McMenimen concurred, but Boothroyd dissented emphatically. The disagreement changed the pace and tone of the conversation: in the next few moments four more teachers commented on the sophistication of the writing, some agreeing with Parker and others with Boothroyd.

Focus on Description

“Before we leap into this argument,” Seidel urged, “let me bring you back even further. I want to maintain a focus on description even if it seems you are describing the most obvious and mundane things.” Perhaps the words “mundane and obvious” struck a chord; one after another, the next remarks called attention to new aspects of the work: “He had three magic markers,” “I see a poem. There’s a poem with the child’s name.” “Loves to make stars,” “Almost the whole page is full with a combination of drawing and writing.” Boothroyd wondered whether the child intended to write “A dam” or “Adam,” then McMenimen, Parillo, and Parker tried to figure out whether the child balanced on the apple’s stem was holding a gun or a hatchet in his right hand.

“Describe what it looks like,” Seidel urged again, and over the next few minutes a rich description of “Adam is for Apples” emerged:

“The stars are going around him. It’s like this circular...”

“The apple is huge. It’s ten times the size of either person.”

“It is two-colored in an interesting way. It’s brown and red, but instead of being brown and red in the way you would think many children would do it, with a brown part and a whole red part, the red almost looks as if it was second thought after he started doing the brown.”

“It looks like he’s dancing on the stem. He’s actually tip-toeing on the stem of the apple. It’s almost as though he is doing a little balancing act there. And then the figure below is almost dancing.”

“One character is all colored in. The other one is not.”

“It’s as if the stars are framing the apple... there are two-color stars, too.”

“It’s almost like the stars are a frame around the whole thing.”

“The writing is excluded, separate from the drawing — except for his name.”

As the group approached the end of part one of the conference — description and observation — Parillo, McMenimen, and Boothroyd offered interesting interpretations of the text before them. “I keep thinking of James and the Giant Peach,” ventured Parillo, “This is almost like ‘Adam and the Giant Apple.”

“I’m thinking the opposite,” countered McMenimen. “I’m
thinking. "This kid has been to Sunday School."

"Yes, yes, religion did come into it," Boothroyd agreed. "The very first time I looked at it I thought, 'Adam and the apple!' I didn't think it was biblical."

When the laughter that greeted these comments had subsided, Seidel observed, "We've probably moved from description."

"Into interpretation," concluded Parker, chuckling.

Although Seidel's comment could have signaled a transition to the next part of the CAC. Raising Questions, the teachers continued for some time to notice and point out new features of "Adam is for Apples." "There is something on his shoes that almost looks like roller skates." "Something on the bottom of the drawing, the way he's done it, implies effort to me -- like he is making an effort to hold the apple up." By the time the group moved on to "My Little Princes," a story by one of Parker's students, the teachers had more questions about Adam and his work than Seidel could answer.

"How This Is Going To Affect My Teaching?"

At the beginning of the group's next meeting with Seidel, Liz Parillo articulated a concern that ran through her journal reflections for the full lifetime of the group: "I keep wondering about how this is going to affect my teaching." Recalling Parillo's question several years later Seidel confessed, "I always felt quite inadequate trying to provide an answer to her question. The truth was that I didn't know if sitting together for these many hours talking about specific pieces of writing would, in fact, translate into something positive for her students." He derived some reassurance from Parillo's eager participation in discussions, and from her journal entries -- in one she noted "I'm aware of how alive I feel when I am part of a conversation/discussion about language." He did not, however, imagine that any of the Gloucester teachers would find a way to bring the CAC into their classrooms directly.

In fact, however, Cherylanne Parker saw in the Collaborative Assessment Conference the seeds of an answer to a problem that had been vexing her for some time: she was not satisfied with the ways in which

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**Conducting a Collaborative Assessment Conference**

The Collaborative Assessment Conference has seven parts:

**Reading The Text**

The presenting teacher hands out copies of the text to be discussed without saying anything about the author or the context in which the text was written. Participants read in silence.

**Observation And Description**

Participants take turns making statements describing the work they see in front of them, using clear, simple language. They refrain from making interpretations, judgments about the quality of the work, and statements about what they like and do not like.

**Raising Questions**

Participants articulate their questions about the child, the assignment, the work, or whatever else they find themselves wondering about.

**What Is The Child Working On?**

Participants speculate about what the child was working on when s/he created the text. They explain what it is in the text that suggests a particular conjecture. For many participants this is the most puzzling part of the protocol since all these guesses must remain uncertain.

**The Teacher Speaks**

The facilitator now invites the classroom teacher, who has listened silently to the comments of others up to this point in the conference, to consider three questions: Do you have any observations you would like to add to those already made? Is there any information about the child, the assignment, or the way children write in your classroom that you think would add to our understanding of the work? Did the readers' comments raise any questions for you either about responding to this text or this writer?

**Teaching Moves And Pedagogical Responses**

Participants consider what the teacher could do to support the child's development as a writer. "Many kinds of responses may come up in the conversation -- from suggestions for lessons to future writing assignments to questions or comments the teacher may share with the child," writes Seidel of this part of the conference.

**Reflection on the Conference**

Participants assess the conference itself. Which parts worked well, which did not, what was satisfying, enlightening, frustrating, or disturbing? The facilitator makes sure that the presenting teacher gets a chance to talk about any feelings s/he may have had about having her student's work examined so closely.

The reflection can be done in writing, in conversation, or both.

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her students responded to the work of their classmates. "I want them to move beyond simply saying 'I like this' or 'I don't like that,'" she told Seidel at one of the group's early meetings. "I want them to look deeper, to think harder about why and what they like."

Parker saw the CAC protocols as a potential tool for enhancing classroom conversation about student work. And a year after the

"I thought he'd been working on his writing: how he said it, and how he used his voice, and his language, and how he showed exactly what things looked like made you feel like you were right there, right behind him in the wagon."

conversations about Adam's Apples and "Beautiful Butterfly", her fifth graders were engaging in similar inquiries.

CAC in Fifth Grade

It is nearly lunch time on a warm May morning one year after the Fuller teachers' five meetings with Seidel and Quentin is chairing a Collaborative Assessment Conference on his classmate Nathan's Westward Expansion project. The pace is a little slow, and five minutes into the conversation Quentin is visibly impatient, wrinkling his brow in disapproval as he surveys the classroom. "How about some more hands?" he exhorts his classmates. The fifth graders may well be a little tired; they have already listened quietly to Alyssa's harrowing account of a Na-
tive American girl's experiences on the Trail of Tears and Nathan's journal of a felon who traveled west in 1849 to escape hanging and to prospect for gold— which took over half an hour even though both Alyssa and Nathan read their accounts straight through.

Quentin grins, suddenly inspired, "Come on, all of you: thinking time. Ten seconds." He leans confidently back in his chair. "Okay, do you have questions?" Alyssa catches Quentin's eye and points to the sheet of yellow paper taped to the blackboard. This poster lists the questions that guide the conferences—and the order in which they are to be considered:

1. What did you see and hear?
2. What has this student been focusing on?
3. What was successful?
4. Questions
5. Goals and Suggestions

Following her finger, Quentin reads haltingly, "What has this student been focusing on?" He opens the floor for the second part of the conference and acknowledges Carmen's raised hand.

"Like how..." Carmen stops, grins sheepishly and fumbles for the English words to express her thought.

"Can you say it in Spanish?" Parker suggests encouragingly.

"Can someone help me explain it to him?"

"Sure, go ahead." The class waits while Carmen whispers to Sarah who then translates, "She thought you were focusing on the way you expressed the feelings."

After a few more contributions from the fifth graders, Quentin acknowledges his teacher's raised hand. "I think Nathan has been working on really using details to establish character," Parker asserts. "Before—in his earlier projects—he added details to establish scene. Now he's really thinking about personality details."

Quentin nods toward a small dark-haired boy in a big white sweatshirt, "Mario?"

"I thought he'd been working on his writing: how he said it, and how he used his voice, and his language, and how he showed exactly what things looked like made you feel like you were right there, right behind him in the wagon."

"Melissa?"

Melissa addresses Nathan directly: "I thought you were focusing on writing more of a story, and putting in more details and doing the physical features of the countryside."

When everyone who wants a turn has had one, Quentin turns again to look at the yellow poster and reads the next question: "What was successful?"

Arms wave. Avoiding the eyes of several students who have already contributed to the conference, Quentin acknowledges Thomas.

"Well," declares Thomas, "the details give you an idea of what is going to happen."

"I think he focused on the character himself and how he expresses his feelings," contributes a boy in a red sweatshirt.

"Melissa?"

"I thought it was successful how he stopped the story when the man died. And," Melissa turns to Nathan, "you didn't even finish the sentence!" Nathan's journal, which began on April 4, 1849, took his protagonist from New England across rivers, mountains and deserts, through loneliness, thirst, hunger, extremes of temperature, the death of his dog, and disease. It ended tantalizingly close to the Forty-Niner's destination:

September 5: I'm out of water again and I'm in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Hopefully I'll find a watering hole.

September 6: Today I found a watering hole and filled my 2 barrels. For the last hour I have been vomiting and shakig.
"I'm so weak I can hardly breathe. I think I'll have to..."

"Yeah," breathes Tony softly, "That was cool!"

Following the protocol, Quentin calls for questions.

"If you could change one thing, what would it be?" Reggie asks Nathan.

"Maybe having it so you wouldn't go through the whole trip so fast. Because it was a little unrealistic. He was like," Nathan's arm sweeps through the air evocatively, "flying."

"I was wondering: why do the characters always die in your stories?"

"What made you choose the Gold Rush?" Kim wonders.

"It was what I could find the most information about. My grandmother had a book about gold miners in the California Gold Rush."

"What would be a goal for you?"

"Probably to put more detail in the scenery, too, as well as in the character," Nathan replies decisively. "Cause, like the last time I put a lot of detail in the scenery, but not in the character, and this time I put a lot in the character but not in the scenery."

"What would you say was successful?" asks Elizabeth.

"Probably when he was explaining how the mountains looked, and how the oven smelled when they were wet. And where I explained how the man felt when his dog died."

Parker, perhaps worrying about getting through the rest of the presentations, suggests moving on to Goals and Suggestions. Quentin is in charge, however, and he denies the motion and nods to Matt, whose arm is waving wildly.

Matt fastens Nathan with his eye. "I was wondering: why do the characters always die in your stories?"

Nathan startles visibly, looks down at his feet, and then grins at Matt a little ruefully. "Well, I don't know." As Nathan begins to laugh, his classmates join in.

"Have you noticed that, Nathan," asks his teacher. "Have you noticed that your characters die?"

Nathan nods emphatically.

"Oh, yes. Like in Urban Legends he got crushed in the house. And in the Civil War one. ... A dozen voices join him in listing the fictional characters that he has killed off over the past eight months.

Catching Up

At 3:00 on a Monday afternoon in late September, 1996, Seidel parks his car in the Fuller School lot for the first time in three years. He is here to meet with all the teachers who are still in the school, to present them with copies of his now-complete dissertation, and to catch up. He brings with him a visitor from Michigan.

Parker and Carter meet Seidel and the visitor at the front office and after greetings and warm embraces, all proceed to the school library where they are joined by four other teachers. Three of these were part of the original group; the fourth, Penny Lawrence, has been greatly influenced by the work her colleagues did there.

When everyone is settled around the big round table and Seidel has given each of the teachers a copy of a book chapter he has just written about the work of the group and described a bit about the dissertation, Parker catches him up on school transfers and new babies. Seidel talks about the process of working on his dissertation, about his own pleasure in listening to the audio tapes of the 18 hours he and the teachers spent together, and about his admiration for the way in which they had, as a group, taken on the challenges he laid before them. "You asked hard questions — some I heard then, some I only heard later," he adds, "but it was always in the spirit of trying to get the most out of it."

"I was telling Penny today at lunch," Carter grins, "about 'The thing is not the thing.'" Laughter erupts around the table as Carter reiterates, "The thing is not the thing: the portfolio is not the thing," remembering the effort she had made during one of the group's meetings to articulate her growing sense that portfolios — which had even in 1993 become a reform buzzword — are meaningful and useful only if they become a means to learn more about children and their work.

"I've tried to explain that to people," Seidel smiles, "but I just can't do it. I guess you have to get there." He stops and looks around the table for a few seconds, and starts again, slowly.

"So, anyway, what are we wondering about is, what has it meant? How has it stuck around? How do you think about it now? And what influence, if any, has it had on your classrooms and your kids?"

"I think the impact has been incredible," Carter leans forward, emphasizing the last word. "You know, doing it with the whole class was the most — It was usable, and it was structured, and it was a tool I could use with my own class."

"I did it with Penny," Carter gestures toward Lawrence, "She was interested in the process and so we did a collaborative assessment on the work of one of her kids. And two years later I can see the impact on the way they are talking about writing in her class."

Parker nods emphatically. "I think it is seeping into everything we do, in ways we probably can't decipher any more. It has changed the culture of looking at kids' work. It has affected the language around..."
how we assess kids. Even people who were not part of the work we did with you are now part of it in ways I couldn't define completely. You walk into a classroom and you see the way teachers are talking to kids about looking at their work and reflecting on their work..."

"For me, as a kindergarten teacher," Alyce McMenimen offers, "I realized that I had to provide children with opportunities to look at their work. It drove home how we have all these wonderful things that they have just created, and it's the perfect opportunity to talk about what it is they see. The frustration is time: I have a two-and-a-half hour day. There isn't that time. But I realized that you have to make the time anyway because, if we don't develop the language in kindergarten, we won't ever do it."

"It's interesting," Seidel muses, "because I don't think I ever suggested you should do this with kids." "No, no, you didn't," Carter, Parker, McMenimen, and Wilmot agree.

"But I knew it was something I wanted to do with kids," the kindergarten teacher recalls, "because with 5-year-olds you get an immediate, "Look! What do you think?" and I saw that I needed to turn the mirror around: No, you look. You tell me."

"In our classes, we are doing a lot of project learning," Carter tells Seidel, "and the Collaborative Assessment Conference fits perfectly. "Say how it fits," Seidel requests. "It's that precision of thinking," Parker begins. "It's that precision of language around something: where in the past I would have asked, 'How will I know this is going to be a good project?' and they'd have said, 'Well, you take your time, and I'd have said 'Great!,' and let it go at that, now I'd say, 'Well, what would be evidence of your taking time? What would that look like?' I'd get down to that so it is itemized for them and it is in front of them before they even start."

The "givens" listed on the board for the Westward Expansion project reflected the fifth graders' efforts to specify in advance what they would need to include in their project in order for it to reflect and extend their understanding of this period of American history:

- Family
- Personality
- Joy/sorrow
- Geographical features
- Ancestors
- Route
- Map with key
- Reasons for migrating

"So," Parker continues, "Actually, we start the collaborative process before anything, when we talk in advance about how we'd assess and create a rubric for discussion. So there are no surprises."

"Yes," interjects Lawrence, "That's what I learned from you."

"So then," Parker explains, "when you go back to the collaborative process it ups the level of their thinking. They've already done the pre-thinking and they've done their project, and all of a sudden, because they have their project in front of them, they can go to the next level because they can look and say, 'Oh, you know what I should have done is--' and they get more specific so the next time it re-ups it."

"So this is the process I've been seeing in a number of places," Seidel muses, "where the quality of work seems to be going up."

"No question about it," Lawrence agrees quietly.

"But it isn't as though anyone has been pushing, or saying it has to get better."

"That's what's so remarkable," Lawrence nods. "It comes from the child. It's not because someone is saying, 'Use better language.'"

"What I have found," Parker asserts, "is that when they present projects, they sort of put pressure on one another. Their language is always careful—I have very rarely had to call a child on being too rough—but most of my kids would never have turned in a second bad project after the first time they presented. Because the class would just sit back and say, 'Can you show me where such and such happened?' Because they had the rubric that they had established beforehand and they had the language, and they had the process that made it safe.

"It put pressure on them in a way that I could never put pressure as a teacher. Because the minute I put a grade on something, or said 'This isn't good enough, go back and redo it,' I'd get this incremental stuff -- 'What will she let me get by with?' Whereas when the kids would say, 'You might want to revise this to do such and such next time,' it was a completely different kind of conversation. And then they started competing to do revisions."
Investigating Jack’s Thinking

by Liz Sweeney
Maurice Tobin School,
Boston, Massachusetts

Although some teachers speak eloquently about the value of spending an hour or two looking with colleagues at a child or a child’s work, most of the time teachers work alone, behind the closed doors of their classrooms, at making sense of their students’ thinking. In this article Liz Sweeney describes a slice of such work – the thinking she did over a three-day period as she investigated the mathematical reasoning of one of her fourth graders.

Sweeney describes the context in which this work was done:

The student body of 518 kindergarten-through-eighth grade pupils in the Maurice J. Tobin School reflects the diversity of our inner city neighborhood. 28.8% Black, 3.7% White, 0.8% Asian and 66.8% Hispanic. Like the housing project surrounding it, the Tobin School is in the process of extensive renovation. The current dismantling and disarray really hold the hope of the future. The Tobin has received a four-year “21st Century” grant, funded by the Boston Plan for Excellence. The entire school staff will be examining our vision for the Tobin and our role, individually and as a community, in whole school reform. For many of the faculty already deeply involved in professional development and school reform, the same questions get asked in so many ways. “What does good teaching look like?” “How do we know what our students are learning?” “Is it clear what we really value?” These questions have also given rise to serious and often heated staff discussions as we struggle with issues about student thinking and assessment. Our low scores on the Metropolitan Achievement Test 6 force us to take a critical look at past teaching and learning in our classrooms. We face a dilemma in the contradictory facts that meaningful whole school change takes time, and that our school system measures student learning (and teacher performance?) with annual standardized test scores. Forced to ask ourselves hard questions about what is happening in our classrooms for our students, we wrestle with ideas about what learning looks like, how we measure it, and how we present it to the public.

Along with two other teachers from my school, I am currently participating in a four year NSF funded project, Teaching to the Big Ideas. This professional development opportunity has shaken my thinking about teaching and learning to its roots at the same time it has supported my changing practice. I’ve learned to reflect on my own learning and thinking in mathematics as well as that of my students. Slowly and painfully, both my perceptions and my practice of teaching have evolved. Shedding the comfortable role of “teller” of information I have heartily, though hesitatingly, embraced the less secure model of “listener” and facilitator. The following episode, my reflection on children’s mathematical thinking about fractions, captures some of my struggle with my changing role as “teacher” and hints at the depth of investment my students have as mathematics learners.

For the previous two weeks, our fourth-grade class had been working on the “Fair Shares” investigation (grade 3/4) of the curriculum, Investigations in Number, Data and Space. As I previewed the unit with my old-fashioned textbook approach, it seemed to me that the lessons barely scratched the surface of what might traditionally be considered grade-appropriate work with fractions. I didn’t see much evidence of adding, subtracting, or multiplying with fractional numbers, the kinds of things that I knew standardized tests measure. Where were all the exercises in recognizing what fractional part was shaded? Where were the pages with the complex sequences of fractions to be ordered? It appeared to me that much precious classroom time was to be spent on discussion, cutting, moving around pieces of paper called “brownies”, illustrating shares and discussion again.

My teacher-centered preparation reinforced my initial reaction: this investigation was going to fall far short of curriculum expectations. On the other hand, I’ve learned that the students bring a range of experiences, ideas, and questions to these investigations which, once expressed, often open up a topic in ways I could never have anticipated. My content preparation for the math lesson serves me well, but the key piece for “teaching” lies in the ability to listen. The students discuss ideas and make meaning for themselves as they struggle with mathematics. In some ways, then, “teaching” becomes the critical task of asking the “next right question”, and, without listening to student thinking, whether in classroom discussions or written work, it seems impossible to know what that might be.

For days, we cut brownies, shared them, rejoined fractional pieces, and discussed our brownie “fair shares.” All the students were actively engaged and, for most chil-
children, understanding grew daily.

School begins each morning with a mathematics “Problem of the Day”. The students are familiar with this routine and it gives them time for some independent previewing and/or reviewing of the kinds of mathematical ideas we are investigating in math class. Students work on the problems any time during the day when they have the opportunity. At the end of the day we share our solutions.

This day the problem was taken from Seeing Fractions: A Unit for the Upper Elementary Grades (California Department of Education, developed by TERC). This text had more brownie and fair share problems in it and I felt as if the students were now prepared to stretch their thinking about fractions more than our original work had allowed. The problem, more complex than our previous ones, had three parts, the third question involved adding fractions with unlike denominators. We hadn't yet done anything involving unlike denominators, and I wondered what my students would do.

The problem read as follows:

I invited 8 people to my party (including me) and I only had 3 brownies. How much did each person get if they had fair shares? We were still hungry, and I finally found 2 more brownies in the bottom of the cookie jar. They were stale, but we ate them anyway. This time, how much did each person get? How much brownie had each person eaten altogether?

As the school day ended, it was evident that the students had worked diligently, but there was considerable confusion and little satisfaction within the group. The confusion and the motivation convinced me that we were right where we should be. We ended up spending three days on the new problem. For most of that time, the children worked on their own or in pairs, as they chose, while I moved around the room having discussions with them about how they were thinking about the problem. Some of the time children shared their strategies with the whole class.

Although everybody wrote something that related to fractions, there were a couple of children who didn't seem to be using the concept of fair shares—the idea that each person at the party needed to get the same amount of brownie. They took 3 brownies and broke them into 8 pieces and wrote out: \(\frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{4}\). They felt satisfied that this was a solution to the problem.

Most of the children did come up with a valid answer to each of the three questions. I was quite interested in Maribel's work. She had devised a procedure which she applies to all cases of fair shares: cut the brownies so that each person gets one piece from each brownie. For example, to answer the first question, she drew 8 faces for the 8 people at the party and drew 3 brownies which she cut into eighths. She then began distributing the pieces to the people. Each time she distributed 8 pieces, she crossed out the brownie they came from. After she finished distributing the pieces, she counted them up: “They each get 3/8,” she wrote. Maribel then applied the same procedure to the second question, concluding, “They each get 2/8.”

Looking at Maribel's work on the first two questions, I would have expected her to say something like, “If they first got 3/8 and then later got 2/8, that means that they got 5/8 altogether.” However, that's not what she did. Instead, she treated the third question as if it were a completely new problem: 8 people shared 5 brownies. She drew 8 faces and drew her 5 brownies and applied the same procedure again. There's certainly nothing incorrect about her procedure, and she felt satisfied with her answer of 5/8. I wondered if she recognized that she could have solved the problem by adding.

Al's method was used by several of his classmates. He first saw that 2 brownies could be distributed among 8 people if one cut them into fourths, and he drew out the 8 quarter-portions. The third brownie could be cut into eighths, and, for each person, he drew an eighth next to the fourth. So, he concluded, “First they got 1/4 and 1/8.” For the second part of the problem, he again distributed the 2 brownies by cutting them into fourths—“Then they got 1/4”—and drew in another quarter-portion for each person. Looking at his pictorial representation, Al concluded: “Altogether they got 2/4 and 1/8.” He also drew a single brownie and shaded in 1/4 and 1/4 and 1/8. (See Al's Work, p. 16)

I felt quite satisfied with the work of the children who solved the problem as Al did. Even so, I still had questions about what they were

Maribel's work
thinking. When I looked at his brownie in the bottom right corner, I saw that he had divided it into 8 eighths. Each of the parts that were labeled 1/4 pretty clearly showed 2/8. Could he look at that and see that 1/4 = 2/8? Could he look at his drawing and see that he had shaded in 5/8? Did he see that, when Maribel said each person got 5/8 of a brownie, her answer represented the same amount as his?

I had these questions about what my students were thinking and expected to have opportunities in the coming days to follow them up. Usually I distribute my time pretty evenly among my students and can ask them questions while they are working. Sometimes, however, I give more of my time to one or another of the children who especially needs attention, and catch up with the others later. On the days that we were working on this problem, I spent much of my time with Jack.

Jack is a sweet kid and is almost always disorganized. At the beginning of the year I found it hard to listen to him; it always seemed like he was rambling and I never expected to be able to make sense of what he was saying. Since Jack rarely volunteered in class I had to be very careful not to ignore him. His classmates seemed to have the same reaction to him. However, in recent years I have learned to listen hard for the ideas my students are trying to express, and when I persevered, I found that listening to Jack offered unexpected rewards. He has good mathematical insights. It has turned out that as I listen hard and take what Jack is saying seriously, so do his classmates. His relationship to them has changed since the fall.

After I handed out the problem on the first day, I began moving through the classroom, looking over children's shoulders, pausing to listen to their conversations, sometimes asking them questions so that I could better understand what they were thinking. By the time I got to Jack, he had answers for all three questions. However, his page was so messy, I couldn't interpret what he had done. (See Jack's work, Day 1)

When I asked him to explain, he could share some confident and correct thinking. Yet, as he tried to retrace what he had done, he lost track of his thinking and couldn't make sense of his own written work.

For the first question, Jack was able to pretty quickly explain that 3 brownies had been cut up so that 8 people each received 1/4 from the first two brownies and then each received 1/8 from the third. He noted that each fair share was 1/4 + 1/8. (Unlike Al, Jack used "+" instead of "and").

Jack's next illustration showed 2 brownies cut into 8 equal shares of 1/4 each.

"1/4" was his answer to the second question. The third part got very messy. It was difficult for him to figure out what he had done in this section. It was clear to him what the question was, but he seemed to feel that he had to reconstruct the whole problem before he could reach a conclusion. (This is what Maribel had done, too!) I wondered why he didn't realize that he had already figured out much of what he needed to know and that he just needed to use the information from the first two parts. When Jack worked to distribute 5 brownies among 8 people, he figured that they got 1/4 and 1/4 and 1/8, and then wrote:

\[+1/4\]
\[+1/4\]
\[+1/8\]

He came up with an answer of 3/8.

At this point, it seemed to me that Jack separated the numbers from the problem context. He stopped thinking about brownies shares and started thinking of the fractions just as numbers. When I asked him how he got 3/8, he explained (pointing to the numerators) that he added the 1's, and then he added + +, two of the denominators, to get 8. He decided that since the other denominator was also 8, it stayed the same, "So 3/8." Jack wanted to be satisfied with this answer and wanted me to leave him alone.
Jack's work, Day 2

Even though I could feel his confidence slipping away, I knew that he was on the edge of new insights; I wanted him to experience the power that comes from struggling with his confusion. I asked him to think more about the third part of the problem and told him we'd talk about it again later. This was the end of the first day.

The next day, some of the children shared their solutions on the board. When Jack came to the board, he explained: "All right, draw 5 brownies, like this." He drew 5 squares. "Cut the first two into 4 parts each," which he did, "and then make the next one into 8 parts." Then, without speaking, Jack divided the last two squares into eighths.

Although I knew that this approach would work out, I wondered aloud why he had changed his strategy from yesterday. He shrugged. Then he counted up what each person got and came up with an answer of 1/4 and 3/8. This time he didn't try to combine them to create a single fractional number. I was struck by the clarity of Jack's presentation. Although he frequently loses focus when working with complex problems, once focused he can confidently work toward an accurate solution.

However, our work on the problem, and my thinking about Jack, wasn't done. The next day we continued the group discussion about the children's various solutions. Since one member of Jack's group said that he didn't understand what Jack had done, Jack offered to explain it again, one-on-one. I was interested to hear how Jack would rephrase the problem and his solution, so I listened in.

Jack showed how the first 3 brownies could be distributed among 8 people to make portions of 1/4 and 1/8. He then showed how the next 2 brownies would give each person 1/4. I noted that he had gone back to his original strategy. Then, unlike the first day, he began to work on the third question without redoing the entire problem; he seemed to realize now that the answer to the third part of the problem could be derived from the first two parts. However, he did come up with the same answer: "1/4 + 1/4 + 1/8 = 3/8."

At this point, I asked about what I saw on his paper (see Jack's work, Day 3): "I see that you did some work with the fractions over here," I pointed to some crossed-out figures on his paper. "I'm wondering why you crossed out some numbers?"

Jack explained: "I was adding the 1 + 1 + 1 and it came to 3, but then I went to add the bottoms [4 + 4 + 8] and it didn't make sense. There's nothing here that's 16 and the numbers I was getting wouldn't match the brownies. When I looked at the brownies I could see that each person had 1/4 and 1/4 and 1/8 and I know the 1/4 and 1/4 make 1/2 and then 1/8. So, I'm telling you that each person had a share of 1/2 and 1/8."

It turned out that when Jack tried to add, he wasn't simply looking at the numerals without considering the problem context, as I had originally concluded. After all, he rejected 3/16 as an answer, because it didn't make sense in this context. So he manipulated the symbols in a different way and came up with an answer, 3/8, that seemed more reasonable to him. Jack had come up with three different correct representations for a single fair share in this problem: 1/4 + 1/4 + 1/8, 1/4 and 3/8, and 1/2 and 1/8. I wondered how he perceived Al's 2/4 and 1/8, or Maribel's answer of 5/8.

Up ahead for all my students was the work of sorting out the ideas behind adding fractions with unlike denominators. I knew I would have to pay attention to how they thought through this, so we could build on the ideas they already had in place.
‘I Knowed That Before You Said It’: The Descriptive Review of a Child

On a Tuesday evening in early November, nine adults gather around a kindergarten-height table in the corner of Claire Batt’s classroom in the Montessori Center in East Lansing. They have come together in order to deepen their understanding of Keith Erickson, a four-year-old in Batt’s class.

As Keith’s teachers and parents pass around pizza, Carroll, who will chair this meeting, introduces himself and his wife, Susan Donnelly, and explains a bit about the “Descriptive Review” process that will guide tonight’s meeting. Carroll, now a Michigan State University teacher educator, encountered the Descriptive Review process for the first time when he was teaching kindergarten in Philadelphia in 1976 (see First Experiences with Description Review) and has, since then, participated in and chaired Descriptive Reviews in several states. Like him, Donnelly, has been teaching, studying, and doing Reviews for more than a decade.

Others around the table are relative newcomers to the process. The three Montessori teachers, Batt, Lorraine Friedl, and Nancy Takis have participated in two previous Reviews. Janel Luna has encountered the Review process in one of her college classes, but neither she nor her brother John, both of whom are here because they work in the Montessori after-school program, have been part of one before. Keith’s parents, Erin Donals and Michael Erickson, are even newer to the Review process; they listen with quiet intensity.

After talking about the assumptions on which the Descriptive Review is based, Carroll frames tonight’s task. “We don’t expect to come to any final answers. We’ll come to some general notions, but we’ll still have uncertainties—which is appropriate when you are talking about people.” He explains that Batt will present first, that as chair he will summarize the themes he hears in her presentation, and that he will then invite Keith’s parents to respond—“Did you find yourself wondering, ‘Is this my child?’ or does the picture sound about right?’—and to add to what they have heard.

“Does he have trouble with boundaries, get into other kids space—trespass?”

Prepared now to introduce the question that will guide the next two hours of work, Carroll turns to Batt. He explains that he and she met a week ago to prepare for tonight’s meeting, and to frame her question. “Keith is four years and two months. This is his second year in Claire’s class. Last year he had joyful times and also angry volatile times. Over the past year she has seen improvements: the difficulties are less frequent and less intense and he is more amenable to mediation. Tonight’s focus is on what Claire can learn by revisiting the history that can help her to continue to guide Keith’s progress.” He asks Batt whether she has anything to add.

Batt shakes her head. “No. I’ll just plunge in.”

What is “Descriptive Review”?

In the mid-1960s Patricia Carini and teachers at the Prospect Center in North Bennington, Vermont, began to develop the format of what they then called “Staff Review of a Child”—the format that will guide this evening meeting. By 1970 they were sharing the format with teachers in other schools. In the late 1980s the Prospect educators changed the name from “Staff Review” to “Descriptive Review”; this modification heightened the philosophical commitment to observation and description and recognized the potential contributions of parents and others outside of a school staff.

In most schools a two-hour evening conference that involved a child’s parents and five of his teachers would be called only in an emergency, to deal with intractable behavior problems or academic calamity. But the Montessori teachers, like many educators who do Descriptive Reviews regularly, see the process as a form of professional development, a way to deepen the understandings that undergird good teaching by looking hard at a particular child. Teachers who write about the Review process emphasize that it is not intended to change or “fix” a child; a teacher asks for a Review in order to deepen her understanding of a student, to become, as Carroll and Carini wrote in 1991, “more attuned to the child’s strengths and possibilities as a person and a learner.” Participants discuss any concerns and difficulties within the context of this effort to see the child’s strengths, interests, and characteristic modes of thinking and acting more fully.

The Review process is built on
several assumptions. First, it assumes that teachers know a great deal about students and, because they spend many hours each day with them in classrooms they "can note subtle patterns and continuities that persons outside the classroom, however knowledgeable they may be about children, simply cannot observe" (Carroll and Carini, 1991). Second, it assumes that a group working together can see more than can any one person working alone. Third, it assumes that all children work actively to make sense of their experiences.

By asking the presenting teacher to organize her description of the child around particular headings,

*Physical Presence and Gesture*
*Disposition*
*Relationships with Children and Adults*
*Interests and Activities*
*Formal Learning*

the Review format ensures that the teacher will see far more about her student than just the worrisome behavior or learning difficulty that led her to ask for the Review. By setting aside time for questions, by giving each participant in the Review an opportunity to speak, the format increases the likelihood that everyone will hear multiple perspectives on the child and the concerns.

**Descriptive Review comes to Montessori**

Batt, Lorraine Friedl, the director of the school, and other members of the staff encountered the Review process several years ago when Patricia Carini came to Michigan State University to give a lecture and work with teachers. Batt recalls being enormously impressed by her experience in the Saturday morning workshop—amazed that it was possible to see so much in a child's work. "At first I wondered how you could spend over an hour just looking," she remembered later. "But the experience makes you open your eyes a little further."

When David Carroll, whose son is a student at the school, offered to help the teachers do a Descriptive Review, they accepted enthusiastically; they were eager to experience first-hand the sorts of understandings the Review seemed to make possible. They spoke first to the parents of a child who struck them as somewhat unusual, although he did not present problems in the classroom—the Review process would, they thought, help them to see him more clearly. However, the child's parents opposed the idea of the Review adamantly, contending that this sort of attention would label their child as a problem.

The teachers decided, for practice, to conduct their first Review on a student whose mother taught in the school. When this Review went well—indeed, the mother reported that she had really enjoyed it—Batt's thoughts turned to a little boy in her class who seemed to be giving the afternoon staff considerable difficulty. "I was worried that they just saw the behavior problems," Batt recalls. She hoped that a Descriptive Review would help those who knew him less well than she did to see other sides of the child. The parents consented to the Review, although they did not want to be present—"so often," Friedl surmises, "parents don't want to participate because they think we are going to pick on their child."

"**We are not looking at a label**"

"One of the biggest things that came out of that Review was that the staff relaxed more with him," maintains Batt. "And my impression is that that came from knowing more about him, having a bigger picture that didn't just focus on the problems, so they didn't just feel, 'Oh, there he goes again, how do I deal with this, what do I say?' when something happens. When they knew the rest of him, they could see—and feel—that this one incident was only a part of him, it wasn't the whole."

"And now," adds Friedl, "He's not the child in the class who is noticed as a problem. And before, he was. And he has relationships with other children."

The Review also prompted some discussion of labeling. "We all have a tendency," Friedl observes, "to slap a label on children when we don't understand what the motivations of their behaviors are and a label did come out in the Review session. David quickly put a stop to it, saying, 'We're not looking at a label, we are looking at description,' which was a really good thing, but many of the staff, when we talked about it afterwards, didn't understand. People said, 'Why do we want to stay away from the label when that's what he is?'

Friedl laughs delightedly, apparently appreciating the aptness of the question, then continues. "And then we did talk about how many school districts have to label in order to get treatment for a child. But here we are looking at description so we can understand that child and think about how we can talk to him in order to help him—instead of, with a label, feeling like, 'Well, he's just going to be like that, no matter what.'"

"And Claire gave some wonderful descriptions. I couldn't have put any descriptors on the behavior, it was just a feeling of 'Oh, he's walking down the hall. I'd better stand over here because he's going to end up banging into me.' But Claire put it that 'He's whirling and twirling, and that's how he moves in space, he's almost dancing.' And then we talked about since he moves so well, how can drama play a role for him, and dancing, and karate. And we had never thought about this."
Looking at Keith

Although Batt and Friedl were pleased by the results of this Review, they continued to feel that parents would be able to add something important to any Descriptive Review. They were therefore delighted when Erin Donals and Michael Erickson agreed to participate in a Review focused on their son Keith.

On Halloween afternoon, a week before the Descriptive Review of Keith, Batt and Carroll met after school to prepare and to construct an organizing question that would capture Batt's concern and focus the Review. Carroll launched the conversation by asking Batt to say what it is that had called her attention to Keith.

"He has real extremes," Batt began. "He'll go from being a happy, sunny, lovable child to expressing the greatest depths of anger. There was a period this summer when he talked about wanting to hurt people, to kill people. He's very intelligent — as a three-year-old he could express all of these feelings, which is unusual at that age. And you could talk to him: he could understand another point of view. And often he could understand the impact his behavior was having on others.

"He has really mellowed, but last year you wouldn't ever know when these outbursts would happen. It just seemed like they came out of the blue. He was volatile, both verbally and physically."

"And, from what you've said," observed Carroll, "not only was it harder to predict, but it was more frequent, too."

Batt nodded. "It used to be so intense. And he'd hold onto it for a long time. If he would disrupt the group, and I would ask him to leave, he would resist and call me 'stupid.' This year I can certainly see that he is not happy about it," she tensed her facial muscles in an inspired imitation of an angry four-year-old. "He'll scrunch up his mouth, but he'll do what I ask him to."

"So," prompted Carroll, "do you want to try to say what the issue is now?"

Batt considered Carroll's question for a long minute. "That's hard. A month ago, when we talked about doing a Review, he was one of the first children who came to mind. But that is less true now: I have some concerns, but they are less intense." Batt's experience is not an uncommon one: many teachers report that as they prepare for a Descriptive Review, their concerns about a child subside. Teachers who have participated in many reviews suggest that preparing for a Review causes them to take time to observe the child in a new way and that this particular sort of attention — even when the child is not consciously aware of it — has a salutary effect on the child and on the child's relationship to the teacher.

"So," Carroll spoke slowly, trying to articulate a question for the Descriptive Review that reflected what Batt heard Batt saying and to jot down notes as he spoke. "You're saying that last year you had concerns about his anger and how it was expressed in relation to other children and that you've seen progress in a variety of ways and you'd like to better understand how to help him sustain this?"

"You can help me to say my question"

Batt nodded. "I don't know quite how to say my question and that is what I'm trying to get from you, David. I'll talk and you can help me." Although formulating a question for the Review sounds like a straightforward task — after all, the teacher only calls for the Review when she has a concern — teacher and chairperson often struggle for some time before they come up with a question that satisfies them. In the last Review she and Carroll did, Friedl recalled that it had taken a week to come up with the right one.

"Okay," Carroll accepted Batt's charge. "What does he look like when he's in one of these periods of extreme anger?"

"Well, usually you'll get an immediate kind of physical reaction. He'll kind of clamp his arms around himself," Batt crossed her own arms over her chest, dropped her chin, clenched her fists, and frowned. "He'll usually turn away from you, kind of curl up, his face will scrunch up into a big scowl and usually there is some sort of sound. He will definitely express his feeling with his whole body.

"When I see this is mainly at Group Time: he has a lot to say and a lot to share, but I am trying to get him to do it in ways that are appropriate."

Carroll probed this last point, and he and Batt talked for a few minutes about other occasions on which Keith became angry. Carroll then asked Batt to talk a little about Keith's thinking.

The previous day, Batt recalled, Carroll's wife, Susan Donnelly, had visited the classroom to talk with the pre-schoolers about Canada. After a few children had told about family trips across the border, others started recounting travel stories that veered far from the topic at hand. "So I said, 'Now, this isn't a sharing day; we are talking about Canada.' Then Keith raised his hand and he had a story that was unrelated to Canada, so I said the same thing to him and I got that..." Batt crossed her arms over her chest, drops her head, and scrunches up her face, wordlessly conveying Keith's response to her reproach. "But then he related it to Canada: he told the same story but started with 'When we were going to Toronto...'. And then it had nothing to do with Canada — it was a story about running out of gas!"

Carroll chuckled. "It sounds as though there's a conflict between what is in his mind and what is in your mind."

"Yes," Batt concurred, "it's often that something I'm giving a lesson on will spark something for him. And if he has something to tell, it feels to Keith as though it should al-
First Experiences with Descriptive Review: Notes On Joining The Teachers’ Learning Cooperative

by David Carroll
January 1981

During my sixth year of teaching, I was assigned a transitional class of first and second graders who were thought to have special needs which would make it difficult for them to succeed in normal classrooms. I had taught kindergarten the previous year and had participated in identifying some of the children for the program. It quickly became apparent to me that I had collected a class full of vulnerable, troubled children, and that I was growing increasingly frustrated. As the winter wore on, the effort of providing for them began to exhaust me.

At some point during that period, I learned of the existence of the Philadelphia Teachers’ Learning Cooperative (TLC), and found out that I knew several of its members from visits I had made in previous years to a local teacher center. I had also heard something of the work being done at the Prospect Archive and Center in Vermont, and knew that it was connected with the Learning Cooperative. The Cooperative seemed like the kind of resource I needed to refresh my confidence in schools and in myself as a teacher.

I began attending the TLC’s regular Thursday meetings. I was at once impressed and somewhat awed by the thoughtful, intuitive comments of group members working on each other’s presentations. Everyone concentrated intently, taking notes, extending each other’s ideas in their comments, and consciously fostering an atmosphere of cooperative support. At first this seemed incredible for a group of exhausted teachers in the late afternoon Thursday. What mysterious source of energy and inspiration could connect them so powerfully? The topic of the first few meetings was fighting, and as I got caught up in the discussions, I began to see some of the elements that bound the group together so strongly.

It was apparent immediately that our viewpoints on the issue of fighting varied widely. But rather than searching for consensus or seeking a common procedure for handling fights, we tried in the meetings to broaden our thinking about fighting and to see it in the richer context of underlying images and feelings. By considering expressions such as “fight for your life,” “put up a good fight,” and “fight for what you believe in,” we gradually lifted ourselves out of the literal classroom context and began to see fighting from a different vantage point – as an expression of vitality and will and values. Collecting and contrasting cultural and historical images of “fighting” enabled us to re-address our classroom concerns. The idea of fighting became more complicated for us.

Our children’s interest in superheroes like Superman, Batman,
and Wonder Woman suggested ideas for comparisons with ancient myths. Reminding ourselves that fighting connects to the life force, we began to see some of the other implications of power and values which classroom conflicts included.

As I made connections between the tangled impenetrable web of problems associated with fighting in my own classroom, the daily conflicts over materials and territory began to take on new meaning. These mental connections seemed to carry with them an energizing force which inspired new ideas and solutions. I realized that this kind of inspiration was what energized the group after an exhausting week.

In my own teaching practice I was aware of that nagging feeling of really messing up situations in the classroom at times. For example, my class was particularly loaded with children who were in one way or another in battle with school. By reacting to their fighting with anger and disappointment of my own, I felt as though I was adding to their problems. This mixture of uncertainty and guilt was at the core of my frustration and exhaustion. It sapped my enthusiasm and eroded my confidence.

(Anecdotal record from 12/18/78)

Tina was really strange today. I think she got mad at Tanya for some reason, then transferred it to me. When I insisted she stay at her work she dumped a big box of crayons out all over the floor. I lost my temper with her and shook her and she started crying her head off. She ran away to her cubby for about ten minutes. When I went to find her she said she was mad at me. I told her that Tolani and Tanya were cleaning up her crayons and that I'd help if she'd come and get started. The three of them got it all fixed up by lunch and she seemed fine. Later in the afternoon, Tina put a lot of green chalk on her face and really looked awful. She kept it on for quite a while but washed it off before the Christmas program. Tolani and Tanya put some on too.

As I listened to various presentations at the Teachers’ Learning Cooperative meetings, I began to hear other teachers describing exactly such experiences. The atmosphere of discussion, which established no hierarchy of individual competence, enabled people to expose their doubts and mistakes while gaining support and getting perspective on the struggle.

As I came to see the group in this way and started to trust and respect its members, I decided to try presenting Tina, who so frequently caused me to lose my temper, in a staff review.1

Tina had spent most of her kindergarten year in stony silence, sneaking about the edges of other children’s activities, either watching impassively or teasing furtively. During the course of her second year with me - in the transitional class - she developed a pattern of repeated tantrums, stubbornly destroying materials, annoying other children, and disrupting the class.

Remembering the detailed descriptions and seemingly inexhaustible records I’d seen others rely upon in staff review presentations, I was worried that I didn’t have enough information to provide an adequate picture of Tina. My only significant source other than my memory was my anecdotal records. I saw them mostly as a record of frustration and confusion and I wasn’t sure what help they would be. However, as I read over my records of six months of occasional comments on activities, struggles, tantrums, and brief warm moments of conversation, I began to realize that some significant progress had occurred. In going over the material with the TLC member who was to chair my presentation, I was able to see a pattern of growth which hadn’t been clear to me until then. The simple process of looking through the notes for comments about one child and adding further memories that then came to mind enabled me to see Tina more distinctly.

(11/15/78)

Tina is so hard to understand. Five or six kids said she poured sand on the floor at cleanup time, but when I tried to get her to clean up she bitterly denied it and talked back to me threateningly to go home. Later I noticed she was sweeping it up. Many times lately she’s insisted upon provoking me before she’ll turn around and sneak over to do what I wanted.

(11/21/78)

Playing Trading Time, a chip trading counting game, with six children. Tina was pretty good at it but after a while she disrupted the game by taking pieces, hiding the spinner board, hitting Tolani. She was very determined and eventually succeeded in disrupting the entire game.

(11/27/78)

Tina got really stubborn with me this afternoon and at circle time disrupted everything by mimicking. I lost my temper and grabbed her hand and held on to it everywhere I went for about 15 minutes. By the end of the day we were on speaking terms again.
what catches Keith’s interest, what has held it over time. Batt reflected for a few moments: it is hard to isolate one or two interests for a child who becomes deeply engaged in nearly every lesson and every book that she reads aloud. She recalled that when Keith had brought in a dollhouse that he and his parents had constructed from an empty oatmeal box, he had described the building process in loving detail. “That’s what he does,” she added, “he describes in depth. He won’t just say, ‘We went to the park yesterday,’ he’ll say, ‘We were going to do X, but then we saw Y...’”

A Matter of Standards

“I wonder if there isn’t a matter of his standards involved,” Carroll mused. “Telling more briefly doesn’t meet his standards. It seems that there is a real array of complex issues around his ideas and his talk, and where they fit, and where they don’t fit.”

Returning to the headings, Batt reported that Keith worked well both alone and with children his own age – girls as well as boys. Sometimes, though, he would join another child’s play in a way that caused conflict: “In our classroom we have a rule: if you start to work with something, you can work with it until you are done. Some activities you can do with another person, but there are certain things that are limited to a certain number of people – like only two can play with blocks. But we have a rule Keith often invokes: it’s okay to watch. He knows how to do this in ways that don’t break our rules but do upset other kids. I’ll often come over to where he seems to be playing blocks along with two other kids and he’ll pull back and say, ‘Oh, I was just watching.’ But his watching is rarely silent – he’s talking to the kids, making suggestions. And then it’s hard not to reach in...”

Formulating the Question

“I think he’s a dynamite kid to do a Descriptive Review on!” Carroll beamed. Picking up his pen, he turned back to the task of constructing a focusing question. “Back in the beginning of the year you spoke of him as a child of extremes. That caused problems with other kids, and sometimes with you – there were battles of will. And furthermore these were unpredictable. You couldn’t get a handle on what was causing them to happen, or predict them.” He looked up from his pad, pen poised to cross out what he had written. “Would you say ‘angry interactions with other kids’?”

Batt nodded. “And the reason it seems like an extreme to me is that I wouldn’t describe Keith as an angry child. There is so much spontaneous joy in him. I can’t count the number of hugs around the knees he has given me, and he is so often hopping up and down beside me, full of happiness and curiosity about what he sees around him.”

“So last year you observed lots of angry confrontations with other kids and with you. And, in contrast, lots of joy,” Carroll was writing again. “And you couldn’t predict these difficult times. Over the past year you have seen lots of improvement: the difficult times are less frequent and he is more amenable to mediation. So, maybe one way to frame our task is to say that you want to use this Review to unpack what you have done that helped, so you can continue to support improvement.”

“Yes, because although there has been great improvement, my standards have also changed,” Batt explained. “Because he is older, I expect more, so we want to be sure that he continues to improve.”

“That feels like it is on the right track? OK, now, looking at the headings, it will be important for you to be able to describe the kinds of things he thinks about, the things he shares, what you know about his
standards, what his viewpoints are. Because it feels as if another way to talk about how to make things better for him is how to help him to make a fit.” When he had finished writing, Carroll looked up at Batt. “Another way to think about this: does he have trouble with boundaries, get into other kids space—trespass?”

“Yes, very much so!” Batt leaned forward, nodding emphatically. Her voice conveyed the excitement of sudden insight. “The business about the watching. And he leans on kids at group time, I don’t know how consciously. And in the thing with Sheri, he was wagging his finger,” Batt’s right hand shot forward as she demonstrated, “right in her face.”

Planning the Meeting

Conscious that their time had almost run out, Carroll turned to laying out what would happen in the meeting. Often in a Descriptive Review the chair invites other staff members to add to the presenting teacher’s observations before opening the floor to questions. But on this occasion, Carroll was worried that opening up the floor in this way would take more time than they had scheduled for the Review.

“Okay, how are you feeling now?” Carroll inquired. “Sounds like you have lots of great description.”

After checking her notes against the Descriptive Review headings, Batt addressed the visitor, “This part of the process feels so important to me. It’s so good to have David to pull all these things out of me.”

“This child feels so layered with complexity, so interesting,” Carroll commented. “In some cases I get a much clearer sense of organizing patterns.”

“Be sure to say that to the parents,” Batt urged him. Although she and Friedl had been eager to involve parents in Descriptive Reviews, she knew how vulnerable parents were in conversations about their children, and she worried about making the experience a good one for Keith’s mother and father. Because they were brand-new to the Descriptive Review process, Carroll and Batt had agreed to invite Donals and Erickson to react to what they hear—“Do you see your son in this?”—rather than to present along with Batt.

“It will be easy to talk about this in a positive way,” Carroll reassured Batt as they put on their coats. “It seems clear that this is an emergent success story.”

The Descriptive Review

A week later, as Batt looks around the pizza-laden table at Keith’s other teachers and his parents and prepares to “plunge in,” the stack of notes in her hands tells her listeners how carefully she has prepared her presentation.

Physical Presence and Gesture

Keith is growing out of the little round toddler look, stretching out. But he still has that wonderful little round face, which is very expressive: you have no difficulties telling what he is feeling when you look at his face. When he comes bounding in in the morning, you know he has lots of energy. And sometimes he even plops himself down with energy—when I wrote these notes I asked myself, “how can you sit down with energy?” But Keith does. When he is pleased—which is quite often—he bounces when he walks and his whole face lights up. When he is telling me about something he is excited about, he can’t stop moving, he’s jiggling when he’s talking.

His whole face is alive with his excitement. When I’ve asked, “Why did you do that, Keith?” he looks down when he talks, his lips hardly move. When he’s displeased, his face kind of lowers and he scowls.

1 These notes summarize the major points in Batt’s presentation; they are not a verbatim transcript and they omit stories she told to illustrate her points and enrich the portrait of Keith.

He leans into me when he is upset or angry, and needs me to hear. He can express his displeasure physically. For example, the other day he interrupted me at Group Time. He had already been reminded once, so I asked him to leave. His eyes narrowed, his face scrunched up, he took off his shoe and pounded on the floor—but last year it would have been on another person.

Disposition

He expresses his feelings verbally as well as physically. I really noticed this last year when he was three, but it is unusual for a four-year-old too. Now he is less volatile, more predictable, his range of extremes is narrower. Now he is easier to approach; if I do give him a time-out, it is easier to talk to him about what is going on.

One night Carolyn (a member of the Montessori staff) was babysitting for him. She had given him a time-out that day. Then, when she was putting him to bed he said, “Do you remember when you gave me a time-out today?” She didn’t remember, so he described how it happened, then she said, “I was just thinking about that.” It wasn’t as though he had any special emotion about it; he was just remembering it.

Relationships to Children and Adults

There aren’t special people he has to play with; he plays with kids who want to do what he wants to do. I’ve had kids come up to me and say, “He’s watching me.” And I say, “There are no rules about watching.” But he knows how to push that to the limit: he gets closer and closer. He likes to watch at the blocks and pretty soon he will say, “Put that one there,” and then he’ll grab one and pretty soon he will be involved in whatever is going on. And I’ll say, “How many people are supposed to be at the blocks?” and he’ll say, “I just watching!” And he’ll back off, but he does know how to push the limits.

Relations with other kids are where the problems come up.
Last year, when he was playing with other kids of like capabilities, I knew it was only a matter of time before I'd have a problem: then he wouldn't even try to use his words if he wanted something someone else had. He will hold off longer now, but still, if he doesn't get what he wants... When he perceives his boundaries have been crossed, whether it is physical or something else, it can quickly become a physical interaction.

But today, Aline was sad because someone had bumped into her and he reached out and patted her and put his arm around her and stroked her and was trying to comfort her. I liked seeing this because it shows growth.

When there's a problem, I like to let both kids tell their story. Sometimes Keith will say, "Yes, I hit him, but I really needed to." And you don't always know what is going to be of the utmost importance.

With adults: he loves adult attention. He'll say "Hello" to me 20 times a day—he'll go to wash his hands and when he comes back he'll say "Hello, Miss Claire" as if it was the first time of the day. He'll come over and give me a spontaneous hug several times a day. And if he notices something interesting, he likes to share it with other people who are important in his life.

**Interests and Activities**

It's hard to pick out one or two things, because he is interested in everything—a missing block, a science experiment, how things work. He notices stuff, he remembers things, he refers back—in all different areas. He has been spending a lot of time at the easel, drawing. Usually kids will draw a picture and then leave. But he was there for half an hour, or even more. I love to watch him. Three days in a row he drew the same picture: three pumpkins and black blobs near them, black things that don't appear to be anything but were drawn very carefully. Twenty or 30 of them. He wasn't all that specific about what they were, but he explained that they were black things and that the pumpkins were really hoping that they would blow away.

Most of the time he was making these drawings he was bouncing up and down, shaking his markers, talking to other kids. But today he was drawing at the easel with Westley, and I played the music that means it is time to clean up, and he kept on painting and

"Ever since he was old enough to move he would crawl out of his stroller to get closer to people."

said, "Keith, what do you notice?" and he looked up and said, "Why, there's music playing. I was so interested in my drawing that I didn't even hear the music."

Many times during the day he'll notice something curious in the classroom and he'll come and get me because of course I'd want to know what the hedgehog is doing right now or that something is tilted in a way it normally isn't.

**Formal Learning**

What stands out is his intelligence, expressed in his vocabulary and the way he expresses himself. If there is a new adult in the classroom, he'll overhear him talking and say, "Wow, how old is that child?" I'm used to it, but when new people come in the classroom I'm reminded. He very much likes to learn. He is very enjoyable to give lessons to because he learns quickly and is interested in what he is doing. Sometimes his curiosity and intelligence get in the way: I'll be ready to start the lesson but he has lots of things to say first—or the lesson will be interrupted with an observation he needs to make, because when he has something to say he really needs to say it just then, it feels very important to him.

Nearly finished, Batt tells the story she had told Carroll a week earlier about Keith's successful repackaging of his running-out-of-gas story as a "when we were going to Toronto" story. Keith's parents, Donals and Erickson, laugh heartily.

"That story was completely fabricated," asserts Donals, grinning.

"Every detail," Erickson chuckles. "There was nothing in that story that ever happened."

Batt concludes with her analysis of Keith's strengths and vulnerabilities: "His strengths are his intelligence, his curiosity, and his interest in everything around him. He is a sensitive child, and his greatest vulnerability is his sensitivity around his own feelings."

As chair, Carroll must now summarize what he has heard and identify some themes in Batt's presentation. "Keith is a person of great expressiveness," he begins. "Claire talked of the many ways she could read his feelings: in his voice, in his body and the way he moves, as well as in his words. He is superbly articulate in many ways. He is able to negotiate around the boundaries of rules—whether it is recasting his story so it fits within the Canada framework, or something else. He is effective in arguing, in justifying what he has done."

Carroll looks over at Batt. "You also described him as being reflective, giving the example of thinking back at the end of the day with Carolyn—you described this as being dispassionate, too."

"Another striking thing: he has his own time frame, and feels a real urgency to speak when the idea strikes him."

"In terms of his relations with others, he has the ability to participate in all kinds of relationships. He seems to know how to make things work with other kids, to get into other kids' play. And he is a person of many interests. You didn't say this," Carroll nods to Batt, "but he's sort of a collector of ideas, he really remembers things, he holds onto things. I had the image in my mind..."
of things sticking to him, and one of his strong interests is just that: to collect observations and ideas about things. You didn't say this directly, but it seemed clear: here is a person in love with words.

"You talked about other kinds of engagement, about drawing, about figuring out how things work. And you talked about a child who can be immersed in what he is doing (like not hearing the music because he was so involved with a painting), but who also can be in and out — as he was in the other drawing story. This is a person with real range in all areas. You called attention to how intelligent he is, how complex a thinker he is. A person who likes to learn."

His summary finished, Carroll invites Keith's parents to comment on what they have heard. In what ways do they see their son in this? What does not quite fit with their own more extensive experience of Keith?

"I have a couple of comments," Finn Donals begins. "The first has to do with his perceived articulateness about his feelings: I don't think he always does express what he's feeling; sometimes he covers it up, for whatever reason. I say this because sometimes I'll be completely baffled about what going on with him, and sometimes it isn't till the end of the day that I finally understand. As an example, one day I was picking Keith up after school and I said, 'We have to buy Victoria a present for her birthday.' And he said, 'Humph. I don't want to. I hate her!' And I didn't know what was going on: Victoria is his absolute best friend, who he plays with all the time. Then I remembered that a few weeks earlier he had chosen something from his toy room — something that was completely meaningless to poor Victoria — and wrapped it up (I remembered because I had helped him to tape it) and given it to her. And she didn't acknowledge it. And it dawned on me, Keith, is it that you feel that you already did this — you already gave her a present and I'm not acknowleding that you chose that gift? And he said weepy, 'Yes, yes, yes!'

The teachers murmur sympathetic acknowledgment of Keith's anger and disappointment.

"And then," Donals chuckles, "he says, 'Let's go get Victoria a present!!' And he was his regular sunny self."

"But sometimes he'll be a perfectly unpleasant child for several hours after school and he won't say why. And it is usually because something unpleasant has happened, perhaps a time-out or a talking-to, and he doesn't acknowledge it and if I say, 'How was school?' he'll say, 'Fine. I've learned to ask, Did you have any time-outs?'. I think there's a system of justice in Keith's head and when something is violated..."

"And I wanted to say something about the story about Carolyn at the end of the day: relationships are really important to him, and after something has happened, he'll check in — he needs to know that everything is okay. My sense is that he was saying, not exactly is he forgiven, but is it okay?

"The thing about him getting angry when you confront him about something he has done," Donals turns to Batt. "I think it has to do with the need he has to be affirmed by adults. It's not so much that he has been caught, it's that he feels that he has changed in your eyes. That 'Humphing' is that... it's that he feels bad that he's been caught, and he's mad at himself. He doesn't forgive himself easily. He does need adults, children, other people. Ever since he was old enough to move he would crawl out of his stroller to get closer to people."

The room is quiet. Keith's mother is telling those who have known him only at school things that they could never have learned for themselves. We wait, spell-bound.

"The last thing I want to say," Donals continues, "is that he's really interested in current events. He followed the election carefully. He watches the news with us and asks about issues that are very hard to explain..."

"And the other thing that Michael wants me to talk about," Donals looks over at her husband, "is the story thing." She explains that Keith's father tells him a story every night before bed, and that Keith often gives quite elaborate directives about the cast and plot of this tale. "He'll say, 'There's to be a knight. And I want the dragon to win...'

"Last night," Erickson elaborates as Carroll, Batt, and Friedl chuckle appreciatively, "I had to improvise an entire Dr. Seuss book with different rhymes. And then, Tell another story, I want it to be a magic story."

"Before Keith came here," Donals recalls, "he was in a babysitting situation, and he was completely miserable for the last six months he was there. We couldn't figure out why — she seemed so nice. Finally I said, 'Keith, are you bored?' and he didn't know what that meant — he was only two and a half — so I tried to describe what it meant, which was hard, but finally he got it. And I asked, 'Would it be better if there was more to do, if there were more books and toys and things. And he said, 'Yes, that's it!'

"And then he came here, and he's never had that problem here. There was something about the switch from loose play — which he didn't want at two-and-a-half — to more structured learning that has made him completely blossom. Yes, there were these outbursts when he was three, but he never didn't want to go to school."

"That is so helpful," says Carroll. "It is a nice example of why it is such a boon to have parents involved in this process."

"And having you add that about his need to get reassurance that he is forgiven, that really helps me," adds Batt. "I can think of so many examples from the classroom of times when he'd do something and I'd think he was trying to get me to not see what he did wrong. Now I think he wanted reassurance that he was forgiven."
The conversation turns, for a few moments, to Keith’s distress at the illness of classmate’s mother, and his long memory for such matters. Then Erickson is reminded of another important aspect of his son’s play. “What the kid does, he constructs worlds. Our house has worlds in it. The passage way is covered with Christmas. And if we touch it,” Erickson chuckles, “we’ll be in dreadful trouble. There are rules. And if you brush up against the rules...”

Donals nods. “Two years ago I was in Krakow for four weeks. He built a house on the Erickson table, and that was where Mommy was. And you couldn’t touch it.”

Questions?

“Well, let’s open up to questions,” Carroll suggests.

The stories and ideas that Keith’s parents have introduced into the conversation resonate with the experience of his teachers, and over the next few minutes staff members who have not spoken before describe incidents and exchanges with Keith that connect to what Donals and Erickson have said. Then Carroll asks Susan Donnelly if she has a question.

“The business about worlds is fascinating,” Donnelly observes. “Before you talked about his building worlds, I was thinking that he’s drawn into the world. It’s like he can’t help himself. And it goes both ways: he pulls others into worlds.

“I heard references to boundaries,” Donnelly continues, “and crossing of boundaries. What does it look like when he plays with other kids?”

John Luna responds with his own experience of Keith in the after-school program. “He is very much a leader: he is the one who decides what we play because he is the one who has the story. He is in charge because he’s got the great idea.”

“What about other people’s ideas?” Donnelly asks. “Does this create conflict with others?”

“He’ll take them in and use them,” Luna replies. “But then he’ll adjust them to what he already has or he’ll take some of them, but not all. Like one time we were playing pirates in the back yard and he said, ‘I want to dig for treasure.’ And I started to dig like this,” Jones pantomimes energetic shoveling, “and he says, ‘No, we’re modern pirates. We have tractors and stuff.’

Donals turns to her son’s regular teacher, “Is that what you see, Claire?”

“No,” Batt shakes her head. “And I was just feeling like I’m so limited, because of all the constraints. I have no time: if I’m going to take 10 minutes for a lesson with Keith, I don’t have time for the prelesson story, or the mid-lesson acknowledgment. And I’ve never had time to play pirates. I am trying to think about how I can see more of this where I am now.”

“His best friend is Victoria,” says Donals. “She is an extremely creative and strong-willed little person. Like him. Sometimes their ideas clash. It leads to conflict, but they continue to be best friends.”

Noting that Nancy Takis has charge of Keith and his classmates from noon till 3:00, Friedl asks her to talk about what she sees during the lunch and nap periods.

“I loved what Claire said about his physical expressiveness,” declares Takis, spreading a couple of pages of notes on the table in front of her. “I am also struck by Keith’s sense of justice: he gets very very frustrated when other kids don’t follow rules. Also, he hates to lose control of himself. He really likes to know what he needs to do and to impose this on himself.”

Takis illustrates her point with a story about lunch time routines. “We have some pretty ratsy placemats and we have some more desirable placemats. For about a week Keith was waiting there to grab the more desirable placemats when they came up. Then I said, ‘Keith, we have to take the top placemat: we don’t have time to wait for a good one.’ I know this is insignificant in the general scheme of things, but the next day he came up to me and said, ‘Miss Nancy, I took that top placemat and I didn’t even want it!’ And he did that for about the next two months— he’d come up and show me the placemat he took that he didn’t want. He was controlling himself and it was important to him that he had the discipline in him to do it.

“The other thing I wanted to say is about his language: his sentences are so complex, you can diagram them, and they work!” In a four-year-old register Takis intones, “Listen to this...” “Wouldn’t you think...?” He uses infinitive clauses! This child does not talk in 5-word sentences—or even 15-word sentences.

Last year, Takis concludes, Keith got into a lot of altercations with other children about toys and equipment: “I was going to play with it first. Just because someone else got to it first... His theory of justice: it was in his plan.” This year this has not happened.

“Being the mother of a child who lives in his own world” begins Donnelly, “I only heard one story of where he was so involved in something that he was oblivious. Is that the only example?”

“He can be very involved in what he’s doing, but if you say something he’s interested in, around the corner and on the other side of the house, he’ll hear it,” answers Erickson.

“He can be intensely focused on something, but still aware,” Donals concurs. “I never have the feeling he’s completely gone.”

Recommendations

Glancing at his watch, Carroll nudges the group into the next part of the conference: “We need to start to make sense of all this and to help Claire to see what she can do in this setting.” He ticks off some of the themes of the past two hours. “We’ve
talked about Keith as a world builder. We've talked about his ideas of justice and fairness. We've learned about his sensitivity and that it is important to him to get reconnected after a breakdown — and this seems to be important to understanding what he's doing in the classroom.

"We are looking for recommendations for Claire for improving connections to the world of the classroom."

"Something I have used that has worked" suggests Donals, "is acknowledging that, by his code, that this is the right thing to do. 'Get that that makes sense to you, but right now you just have to make an exception.' I'm thinking about context, and that some things are appropriate in some places — and some not."

"That acknowledgement is very important, not just with Keith," agrees Batt.

"But you may not always have time," Donals reflects.

Batt concedes that this may sometimes be so, depending on where and when the difficulty occurs. Nonetheless, what she has learned tonight will help her to make sense of Keith's behavior: "Now when I remind him and I get that 'Humph, it's important to realize that he isn't just mad, that this is his commentary on himself and he is pulling himself together when he does that.'"

"At home," Donals adds, smiling, "his litany is, 'I knew that before you said it.'"

"When you said that, I had this image of Keith recalibrating his system of logic," muses Carroll. "You just said that we need to acknowledge his system of logic; we've also talked about the importance of entering his world a little bit."

"We can do this at home — we can slow down, we don't have that much of a schedule. But I don't know if you want to give in too much at school," cautions Keith's mother. "He might need to be learning to get on in the social world."

"I don't think it will take that much," Batt reassures her, "because he is recognizing this and it will just continue."

"He's trying to figure out what's framework and what's negotiable," Donnelly proposes, "the things that he thinks make relationships work — the code, the justice. The sharing of interests is the coin of the realm for him. What are the things around relationships that he sees as the framework?"

Donals nods. "He has different rules for different relationships. He does different things with each grandparent: with his grandfather he does outside things; he does reading with his grandmother. And if they were to switch..."

Friedl addresses Donnelly. "What you were saying about frameworks gives me such an understanding of when he first came here. He followed adults around, really wanted to be with adults, constantly came to see me; to see Claire. He was trying to figure out the frameworks — kids didn't get it; adults did. This is helping me to understand not only him, but children like him."

"Just as a matter of strategy," Erickson proposes, "if he blows up more than it looks like he should, if you can figure out — it helps if you know everything he's done for the past 72 hours — he chuckles at the absurdity of this proposal before continuing. "The other morning we had a house guest, and she slept in. Keith had been a perfect angel all morning and then he had a tantrum in the car: he kicked the car, which he knows ticks me off, and what he said was 'I didn't want you to turn on the car.' And it took me a couple of minutes, but then I said, 'Oh, you wanted to see Rosellen again.' And he said, 'Yes! Yes, that's right!' And I said, 'Well, you'll see her after school.' And he was all sweetness and light again. But it isn't always that easy, of course."

"If it happens at group time," Batt responds, "I can usually see what it is. If it happens another time..."

Carroll turns to Donals and Erickson. "It feels like we have gained tremendous new insights. These have to do with having a new appreciation for his ways of thinking about things, his ideas about frameworks, and ideas about eliciting more clues about what the chain of events has been."

Reflecting on the Process

"One reason we are doing this Child Review is to nudge the process along, to develop our own skill in doing it," says Carroll, signaling a transition. "This is the first time we have done it with parents. Let's reflect on the process. Was it respectful?" Although not all Descriptive Reviews end with a Reflection time, groups that do lots of Descriptive Reviews try to make regular time for conversation about the conversation.

"It wasn't different because the parents were here," Friedl observes.

"Beforehand, I thought, I'll need to make sure I say everything I say with sensitivity," agrees Batt. "But once I got going, I didn't have to think. Because we have talked so much."

"It is so wonderful to see what he is like in other settings, and other parts of the day," volunteers Jakis.

"I found this enormously flattering," comments Donals. "To hear you saying all these things about our child made me feel like we did some things a little bit right. We've been able to figure out some things in the last few months, things that were eating away at him."

"Not just some things right," Batt responds emphatically, "but a lot right. With Keith you can tell that this is a child who has been talked to, that has had all that attention. It does make such a difference."

"I was wondering if I would feel, as David said in the beginning, 'Is this my child?'" observes Keith's father. "I didn't feel like that at all. It all sounded familiar, but it was really helpful."

Janel Luna speaks the last words: "I have used this Descriptive Review process in school, in classes, and I know I will use it as a teacher. I have seen how much you can learn, and what a difference it can make."
Teaching as Acts of Attention: An Interview with Dirck Roosevelt

From 1979 to 1989, Dirck Roosevelt taught at Prospect School in Vermont, where the formats for the descriptive review processes were originally developed. He served first as a teacher and later as principal of the school. Since coming to MSU in 1990, he has worked with other teacher educators to make child study a part of the experience of prospective teachers. In this interview Roosevelt reflects on the value of the Descriptive Review process. He also explains what he thinks men and women just settling out on a teaching career can learn from child study and introduces a child study written by one of his students.

Lately, because of something I am writing, I have been trying to think about teaching as acts of attention. There is so much busyness to elementary school teaching. You are constantly doing things. As a result, I think a lot of times you feel like you’re not really teaching if you’re not giving an instruction or posing questions or assigning a task or evaluating a statement or behavior. And I find myself increasingly willing to say that I think that a lot of what goes on in the name of teaching doesn’t need to happen. I’m more inclined toward an attitude of patience and of creating an environment which contains possibilities and spending some time just seeing how the possibilities get used. I think that it is reasonable to think about that as teaching and maybe a part of teaching that we don’t do enough of. And I think doing Descriptive Reviews over the years really affected how I view teaching.

CM: I’ve heard you say that the Descriptive Review is a particular kind of intellectual event. Can you explain that?

DR: Partly I mean that the Descriptive Review is not just a structure for organizing talk: It is also a structure for promoting certain kinds of thinking and discouraging other kinds of thinking.

And partly I mean that it is organized around patience. The longer you work with it, the more experienced you get, the less likely it is to resolve in very specific concrete, pragmatic recommendations. Or at least those become progressively less important. They don’t disappear, and occasionally, when you have a particular kind of situation where that’s exactly what you need, then you gather yourselves together to get that. But the longer you do it, the more often the really important recommendations turn out to be about how to think about a certain characteristic kind of behavior of a child. Or what to anticipate with a child. Or how to look at a child during certain parts of the day. The bulk of the interest comes in expanding the way you see a child.

A tiny example comes to my mind; it’s from a Child Review we did of a fourth grader at Averill Elementary School in Lansing a couple of years ago. Because his teacher asked me to, I did an observation of this child before the Review. He was often where he was not supposed to be. And he was fairly often in altercations, although not necessarily very serious ones, with other kids. He was something of a puzzle. The little thing I remember is that in the observation I noted that he was at the pencil sharpener a lot. And the pencil sharpener was located not too far from the bathroom.

In talking with the teacher, either afterwards or in the Review itself, I hit upon the metaphor (if that’s the right word for it) of the pencil sharpener being sort of like the fountain in the marketplace in some imaginary place—perhaps an ancient Greek town. And that idea turned out to be very apt. The notion that one of the things that this child was doing was being somehow at the hub of the room, so that he knew what everybody was up to and what was going on, turned out to make a lot of sense to his teacher as we continued thinking and talking about it.

It’s a pretty small example, but it was satisfying because here was a little observation, and a little idea about that observation, that helped the person who knew the child well to make coherent a bunch of what she knew about him.

And, of course, an idea like
that shifts one's sense of what the problem is.

**CM:** As you were talking about teaching as “acts of attention,” I was thinking about the piece that Carole Shank, Debi Corbin, Kathy Beasley, and Sharon Feiman-Nemser wrote about mentoring (see Changing Minds 12, “Making it Happen”: Teachers Mentoring One Another). In it they talk about the power of looking directly into a child’s eyes when he talks to you, and also about the fact that it can require a conscious effort to do that because as a teacher you have so many things you need to be doing at any one time.

The longer you do Descriptive Reviews, the more often the really important recommendations turn out to be about how to think about a certain characteristic kind of behavior of a child.

What is it that you want the prospective teachers you teach to learn from child study?

**DR:** Although this may sound a little trite, I want them to learn something about the individuality of kids. I want them to learn something about the inexhaustibleness of it all: that you don’t reach an end to understanding somebody else and how they make sense out of the world. From an ideological point of view, I want to persuade them by any means necessary that paying close attention to, and trying to understand, individual students is part of their job as teachers. And by the last time I taught the course, I understood as a part of this that I wanted them to see that child study is pleasurable and rewarding.

Oh, and I hoped that child study would persuade them that people are learning whether or not they’re being taught.

I think they sometimes have to make a little leap of faith into the project. They’re not sure that it’s going to be valuable, relevant to teaching, worthy as much time as I seem to be expecting them to give it. I probably don’t even notice how much of that is going on in more recent versions of the course since I feel quite confident in just assuring them that these studies have been valuable in the past and that, with any luck at all, they will find them valuable too.

**CM:** What’s satisfying, for you and for them?

**DR:** For them, I think coming to like the child, when that happens — and I think it mostly does happen now — is very satisfying. It’s especially satisfying, from my point of view, when that liking includes respecting and, specifically, respecting the kid as somebody who goes about finding his or her way in the world in interesting ways.

I think that often by the end of the project, they feel like they’ve learned a lot about this particular human being and that feels pretty good them. I know it feels good to me when I think I see that.

It’s really satisfying to me when students want to come and tell me right away at the beginning of class about some development in the life of their study child or about how something went that they were worried about. I enjoy seeing that kind of involvement.

It’s satisfying when they make the connections between the study child and what they learned as children or youth, especially when they make those connections in ways that educate the rest of the class. One of my students last term had pretty good things to say about having been labeled as having a language disability and the bad effects that had on her and she made a connection between that and what she saw happening to her study child. I guess that’s related to one of the more complicated things, intellectually and psychologically, and that is that in coming to understand another person, you and your own experience in one way are your best available resources and, at the same time, you have to step aside from yourself and to really try to understand others as they are and not as version of yourself.

I love it when I think that some of my students seem to have a feeling of pride both about themselves and about their study children, when they seem to feel, “I know something about this person, this is an interesting person, I understand some things that other people, including people who teach this kid, may not know and understand. I feel pretty good about him/her and about my abilities to know all of these things. And I kind of like feeling like an advocate for this child.”

When I see my students seeming to me to project all of those attitudes, that’s tremendously satisfying.

The excerpt from J.L. Levi’s child study, “What Color Are Birds?” makes much of this concrete.
What Color Are Birds?”
Excerpts from a Child Study

by J.L. Levi
Michigan State University

As I stand in the corner of the playroom, I am aware of four children around me. There are two young boys playing with toys from the toybox next to me (large waffle blocks, a couple of cars). There is also a young girl, about three years old, who is playing by herself in the area to the right of me where there is a play stove and sink. The child who interests me most, though, is seven year old Matt. Matt is sitting about three feet in front of me in a child size chair at a child size table. He chose to sit at the table after asking me for a suggestion of something to do. I asked him if he would like to do an art project. He proceeded to put out a piece of light blue paper and a plastic bin of markers. Now he is sitting at the table beginning to draw a picture.

I am purposefully staying out of his immediate vicinity in order to try not to directly involve myself in his project. Matt has picked up the green marker and started to draw a great big object on his piece of paper. He seems to do this with ease, and I notice that the look on his face is not one of concentration, but more one of joy. Matt finishes his green picture and sets the marker down in front of him, above his paper, and out of his way. He shuffles through the container of markers and comes out with a thick brown marker. At this point I recognize his green picture as possibly being the top of a tree. As he draws with the brown, my idea is confirmed. He is indeed drawing a very nice picture of a tree.

At this point I become more aware of Matt’s physical appearance. His upper body seems pretty relaxed, and he seems to slouch a bit as he continues to work on his project. His head is directly over his work, but cocked to the left just a bit. He is looking right at his work, and as of yet I have not seen him look away because of any factors or activity in the room other than his own. He does not seem to be aware of anything going on around him. He seems to be pretty focused.

Matt is using his left arm to hold the upper left hand corner of his paper. He does not seem to move from this position much. I imagine that this is pretty much a habit for Matt as I have noticed that it is for myself. Matt’s right hand is the one with which he is drawing. He seems to have a firm grasp on the marker which he is holding in the proper pencil grip.

As I watch Matt I notice for the first time that I, like Matt, have been tuning out everything else going on around me.

Matt sets down the brown marker next to the green one on the table in front of him. He picks both hands up off of the table and looks through the remaining markers, using both hands to try and find the color which he wants to use next. When he has found the marker (in this case a red one) he sets his left hand back on the corner of the paper, making a fist, and pulls the marker out of the container. Matt continues to draw. He is drawing some kind of red dots all over the bottom of the page. I am not sure whether these are supposed to be specific objects or whether they are just a pattern of decoration.

At this point Matt looks up from what he is doing and makes a quick survey of the room. He seems to come to the conclusion that there is nothing too important or interesting going on around him because before I can finish my thought, he is working away again at the mysterious red dots. As I watch Matt I notice for the first time that I, like Matt, have been tuning out every thing else going on around me. This seems an odd role for me considering my role in the playroom (as that of a child care provider for all the children in the room). I glance at Rachel and decide that there is no direct need for me to regain my role as the children are under control and do not seem to need me.

Matt is back at work, setting down the red marker and looking through the markers once again. He does not seem to find what he is looking for and picks up all three markers from in front of him and puts them back in the container. He looks around the room again and gets up and proceeds to the art supply cupboard. He opens up the door and looks at the cupboard of supplies for a good thirty seconds. He seems to be undecided about what supplies to use. Because of the length of time he stands in front of the cupboard, I get to wondering if he in fact is even thinking about the materials in the cupboard. Maybe he is thinking about the children and activities that are going on around him.

After a half a minute or so he seems to come to the conclusion that he will keep working on his art project. He grabs a bottle of glue, two very skinny, wire-like craft supplies (one gold and one red), and a small piece of white construction paper. He proceeds back to his table, stopping a moment to look over the shoulders of two boys who are now doing a rather large floor puzzle. Matt sits back down at his chair at the art table. He sets the glue bottle immediately in front of his drawing
where the markers used to lie. He puts the wire-like materials to the right of his drawing just far enough away so that they are not in the way while he is working. The piece of white construction paper gets put on top of his drawing and he is again looking for a marker (with both hands). He searches for a few seconds and, looking confused, gets out of his chair and proceeds to walk over to me.

In observing Matt, I have not considered myself a part of the classroom. I am so absorbed in this that I am startled when Matt walks right up to me and says “What color are birds?” “What color do you think birds are?” I ask. He responds that “They’re lots of colors.” Still looking kind of indecisive about what he thinks he should do, he asks “Are they blue?” I reply “Yep, many are blue.” Looking satisfied he returns to his table, mumbling a “thank you” as he walks.

Matt sits back down at the table and searches through the markers. By one he pulls out a blue, a dark blue (almost purple) and a really light blue (almost baby blue). I find it very interesting that he has chosen to pull out these three markers and make a mental note to check the marker bin later after he has gone to see if these were the only blue markers. He lines the markers up by the top of the paper, and proceeds to choose the light blue to start his new drawing.

Matt is now drawing on the white paper. He starts by drawing a small circle on the left side of the paper. In order to do this I notice that he has his right hand on the paper within the half circle he has made by his left hand and arm. He continues to hold the large blue paper down, but with his left arm this time. His left hand sits on the right corner of the small white piece of paper.

Continuing with his drawing Matt sketches an oval about twice as big as the circle, and attached to it. He then colors the two figures in with the same marker and puts the marker down with the other two blue markers. Next he picks up the dark blue one. He gives the bird a nice round eye and then a smile. Judging from the way he has done this, the bird is meant to be looking straight ahead, but we are seeing him from the side. He then draws two feet on the bird. I find it interesting that these are not your typical bird feet, but they look more like boots. I find myself smiling and hoping that Matt does not realize why I am smiling. Actually, I do not believe that Matt has even noticed that I have been watching him.

Matt puts the marker down and holds his paper up in front of him. He looks at it, appearing to be quite puzzled. At this point he looks straight at me and sees me watching him. Maybe he has been aware that I have been watching him. If so, he does not seem to mind. Knowing I am paying attention, Matt brings his new picture over to me. He hands it to me, and says with frustration, “My bird doesn’t look right.” I ask him “What makes you say that?” He says “I think it’s missing a part.” I ask Matt “Well, what are some things that birds have?” He looks at me with confidence and says “Two eyes, a mouth no a beak I mean, a head, two feet, and... (he thinks for a minute) feathers.” I ask him if this is all. Matt gets a big grin on his face and looks straight up at me with big sparkling eyes and says “Feathers!” He runs back to the art table, sits down immediately and picks up the light blue marker starting to draw again. Before I know it he is putting the blue markers back in their container.

Matt gets up and grabs the wire-like materials and takes them back to the art cabinet, putting them back in their original spot. He has apparently decided not to incorporate them into his project. Instead, he opts for a pair of red, plastic, child size scissors. He takes the scissors back to his table and proceeds to cut out his bird. He is very careful to cut near the edges of the bird but making sure not to get too close.

At this point I notice that he has a pretty tight grip on the scissors. He also seems to be a bit tense as his right arm (the one he is cutting with) is very close to his body (turned in) and does not seem to be relaxed. I also notice that it seems to be a bit uncomfortable as his fingers seem to be a bit big for the finger holes in the scissors. I double check this to make sure he is gripping the scissors correctly. Yes, he does seem to be.

Matt then takes the scissors back to their place in the cupboard and goes back to the table to glue the bird on his picture. He picks up the glue bottle up from in front of him with his left hand (interesting). He then twists the cap with his right hand and turns the bottle upside-down very carefully. He squeezes the bottle with both hands, watching to make sure only a little amount of glue is coming out of the bottle. He dabs about ten small drops on his bird, returns the glue bottle to its place in front of him, and sets the bird near the upper left hand corner of his picture, so that it appears to be flying toward the tree.

Matt gets up and is very careful to return all of the craft supplies to their proper places in the cupboard. He then returns to the table and pushes in his chair, grabs his picture, looks around the room, and decides to join the other two boys with their floor puzzle. The picture is finished, and Matt’s focus has shifted to the puzzle and the boys.

A little later on I approach Matt asking, “Can you tell me about the picture you drew?” Matt is excited by this and starts to tell me that he has drawn the picture because they did a play last week in class called “Johnny Appleseed.” He has drawn a big tree with many apples on the ground because “Johnny Appleseed planted apple seeds in the ground.” When I ask about the bird he replies, “I thought the picture needed a bird. Birds eat apples you know.”
The Leap of Imagination: an essay in interpretation

by Michael Armstrong
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Michael Armstrong is headmaster of Harwell Primary School in Oxfordshire, England and author of Closely Observed Children: The Diary Of A Primary Classroom. In The Leap of Imagination Armstrong shows us what reading a child’s story attentively, using all that we know about the narrative world of childhood, can look like. Although few of us could bring such a rich understanding of relevant literary traditions to bear on a child’s text, Armstrong’s article demonstrates the rewards of sustained attention to a children’s writing and the way in which such attention can deepen our respect for children’s work.

ONE

In his monumental treatise Time & Narrative the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur argues that “to make up a plot is...to make the intelligible spring from the accidental, the universal from the singular, the necessary or the probable from the episodic.” He calls this achievement “the leap of imagination” and illustrates it, as might be expected, from the masterpieces of European literature in the twentieth century: The Magic Mountain, Mrs Dalloway, A La Recherche du Temps Perdu. But what might the leap of imagination look like at the age of five or six, in a child’s earliest attempts at written narrative? Does it even make sense to define children’s work in this way? In any event, does it matter?

Questions such as these are no longer fashionable. We have stopped thinking about children’s thinking. Trapped within the impoverished language of the national curriculum, with its targets, levels and tests, we no longer seem to possess the terms in which to describe the specific energy of children’s thought. Increasingly our judgements lack subtlety, let alone generosity. We are growing fond of the labels, as if we had invented them ourselves: a level three story, a level one writer, a level two child.

Description abhors labels. To describe a child’s achievement is not to impose an external, measurable judgement but to identify oneself as delicately as possible with the world of the child’s work. There is no other way of grasping the work’s significance. I am tempted to say that the suspension of judgement is almost a precondition of description. In due course judgements may become appropriate but they will always remain relative to the work, open to review, and to that extent provisional. Of course a great deal of what children do at school does not call for description. There are routines to acquire, techniques to master, drills to practise. But routines, techniques and drills have little value independently of the purposes which they serve and if it is children’s purposes which we wish to understand, or to promote, description has to be our method.

TWO

One Friday afternoon, towards the end of winter, two children, barely six years old, stood up in assembly to read their stories. Their teacher had given her class small, hand-made booklets in which to write stories of their own invention. They could illustrate their story if they wished but they did not have to. Jessica Orr and Melissa Warwick had worked side by side, looking over each other’s stories as they went along, although they wrote in different modes. They were pleased with the results and wanted to share them with the rest of the school. The girls read boldly, with only an occasional hesitation. You could sense a certain pride in their achievement. The audience caught the spell, even as we smiled at each story’s eccentricities. It was a magical moment, as if the leap of imagination had taken place right there before our eyes.

Title page of The Poorly Mouse

1 The author wishes to acknowledge his indebtedness to discussions that took place when he presented this essay at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and at a conference at the Centre for Primary Education. The essay was published in England in Forum. © Michael Armstrong.
Here is Jessica's story. She called it *The Poorly Mouse*.

I want to examine Jessica's story page by page. I shall offer a descriptive commentary which attempts to interpret the story in its own right and at the same time to read it as a particular instance of the early life of narrative. At the end of the commentary I try to draw out some of its educational implications.

**THREE**

Title Page: *The Poorly Mouse*

In adult speech "poorly" is almost always used predicatively. "Jessica is poorly and won't be at school today." Jessica's usage is original, a first sign of her inventiveness. The drawing at the foot of the page is the visual equivalent of her title. The tiny mouse is lying on a large bed, its head propped on a pillow. This bed plays no part in the story that follows. In a sense, it does not belong to the story at all. Its significance lies outside the manifold of events that make up the plot. It pictures the thought of Jessica's title, though not of the story as a whole, which is no more than set in motion by the mouse's injury.

Page One: *Once there was a mouse who lived near where the wolves lived. One day a wolf came out of its home and hurt the mouse.*

The opening page introduces a fairy tale: a mouse in a land of wolves. Wolves are unknown in Britain except in the fairy tale, where they are ubiquitous. Little Red Riding Hood and the Three Little Pigs are still among the most popular of all the stories that children at our school are likely to have heard, long before they come to school. With her very first sentence, then, Jessica places her story firmly within tradition. The elements of that tradition include magic, often employed by those who come to the aid of the hero or heroine, conflict between animals, family and happy endings that tend to be more ambiguous than they might seem. Each of these elements finds a place in Jessica's story, as we shall see, although her narrative is anything but conventional. Like most children, even at this early age, she plays with tradition rather than reproducing it.

"...who lived near where the wolves lived." The language is chase but full of menace in the context of the fairy tale. The written text goes on to provide the brute facts: "one day a wolf came out of its home and hurt the mouse." It is the pictured text which on this particular page colours and elaborates the narrative. A bold sun between tall trees outlines the woods in the middle of which the tiny mouse is at play. Meanwhile, from the edge of the page, a wolf's head, emerging from its lair, surveys the scene. Eye, nose and jagged teeth in a head already larger than the mouse itself - threat made visible on the page. The animation that is so marked a feature of Jessica's drawing throughout her tale is as much a product of her pencil line as of her choice of subject or pose. Two of the three trees are drawn with a single pencilled flourish. The sun is a thick circle with hard pencil strokes radiating from it randomly in all directions. The mouse is delicately drawn, segment by segment, head, body, legs, eye, ear and flourishing tail. You can almost feel the physical effort taken to draw it minutely. As for the wolf's head, its teeth are a double row of sharply drawn chevrons, superimposed on the much softer line of the wolf's jaw.

This first page of Jessica's story demands to be read as a written and drawn narrative whole. The drawing is not an illustration but part of the text itself, providing a context and establishing a mood. In one way and another this is true of every other page in the narrative. Each presents its own unity. Turning the page becomes a form of punctuation, encouraged no doubt by the fact that Jessica was handed the booklet to write in before she composed her tale. She does not make use of sentence punctuation, with the possible exception of a single full stop at the end of this first page. This is a routine which she has still to acquire. But the punctuation of discourse is already part of her repertoire, guided by her developing sense of narrative propriety.

Page Two: *One day a little girl was walking in the wood when she saw the mouse. Then she saw it was injured.*

Page one of *The Poorly Mouse*.
This “one day” is the same day on which the wolf came out of its home and hurt the mouse, but we have turned the page and begun the story again from a human perspective. With this turn we enter the world, not so much of fairy tale as of a family saga: the story of a girl, her mum, the vet and the awesome dad. Fairy tale and family saga are interrelated in many of the stories which children tell or are told, as they are within the folk tale tradition as a whole, for example in Little Red Riding Hood itself. As Angela Carter once remarked, “a fairy tale is a story where one king goes to another king to borrow a cup of sugar.”


Jessica’s double opening draws attention to the juxtaposition of folk tale and family life in the story she has to tell. In an adult writer this might be seen as a self-conscious conceit. Jessica is less knowing but I doubt whether her new beginning is less deliberate. It is interesting to compare the opening of her friend Melissa’s story, The Little Girl Who Got Lost: “One day a little girl came outside and she decided to go out for a walk.” Melissa’s story is a family tale with no folk tale element. She begins it straightforwardly enough on the equivalent of Jessica’s second page. She doesn’t require the first of Jessica’s two beginnings.

It might seem inappropriate for Jessica to speak of a little girl “walking in the wood” when she has not yet mentioned any wood. But of course she has mentioned the wood, in her drawing on Page One. I read this as a sure sign of the unity of word and picture in her story. As so often throughout the narrative her words are carefully chosen. First the girl sees the mouse, then she notices its injury. The separation of the two kinds of recognition indicates how precisely the narrator has imagined the scene. It is only after the girl has caught sight of the mouse, delightfully perhaps, that she realises with horror that it has been injured.

The drawing below the written text catches the moment of recognition, without on this occasion adding a setting as the first picture did. The mouse lies centre stage while the girl peers in from the margin, her mouth open, perhaps in a gasp. This is one of only two places in the story where a figure is drawn with an open mouth. The second is on Page Six where the mother’s mouth is open as she confronts the dad returning from his holiday. The similarities and differences between the drawings on these first and second pages, the mouse in the middle of the page each time, the wolf and girl each entering open mouthed from the right, dramatise the evolving plot and incidentally reinforce the sense of a double beginning. The mouths have been mute signifiers.

Page Three: So she took it home and showed her mum. Then they both took it to the vet but the vet was busy.

Page Three complicates the plot, reinforces the interdependence of written word and drawn image and confirms the unity of the individual page in Jessica’s story. Jessica is careful to insist that it is “both” the little girl and her mum who takes the mouse to the vet. This apparently simple emphasis establishes the rapport of mother and daughter, a complicity which binds mother, daughter and animal in a magical embrace from which, as we are to discover, the father, like the vet, is excluded. Mother, child and mouse live in the world of fairy
...busy.” For children it is such a dismissive word, the sign of a world of adult concerns that can find no time or place for children.

...but the vet was busy.” Jessica might have chosen to place these words on their own separate page. Her decision not to is surely significant. The vet's business is the complication, or trouble, which drives the story forward, threatening to frustrate the good intentions of mother and daughter and opening the way for a much more dramatic display of their resourcefulness. Page Three presents the failure of common sense: the vet is too busy to attend to the mouse. Page Four substitutes magic. Each page expresses its own thought, the ineffectiveness of reasonableness, the triumph of play. To have placed the vet's business elsewhere than on Page Three would have disrupted the symmetry of the plot.

...busy.” For children it is such a dismissive word, the sign of a world of adult concerns that can find no time or place for children. It's the grace of the mother in Jessica's story that she is not too busy to share her daughter's care. It's the misfortune of the father that he can neither recognise nor share the pleasures of complicity.

The drawing pictures the disappointment of the mother's and child's expectations. As on Page One, it extends the narrative. Mother, child and mouse form a single hopeful group. In front of them a cat waits on top of its basket while its owner approaches the vet, yet another figure who looks in from the margin of the page, surveying the scene. Mother and child are smiling expectantly while the vet looks glum. The words above have already forewarned us that these smiles are about to be disappointed.

Page Four. So the little girl and her mum pretended to be the vet and soon got the mouse better.

In children's earliest stories the most significant words often carry the heaviest weight of meaning. So it is with this "so". We have reached the moment of transformation. The business of the vet, representing the unavailability of medicine or the reasonable world, opens the way for magic. The word "so" is an expression of purest consequence.

The audience of older children and adults, listening to Jessica's story, chuckled at the word "pretended" but our smiles were as much in recognition of Jessica's daring as her naivety. So much of early childhood is bound up in play and in the pretence that makes of play an imaginative world as rich as the real and vital to any satisfying engagement with the real. In the fairy tale it may take the godmother or the witch to weave a spell to heal the injured but for Jessica all that is required is confidence in the power of pretence itself, a triumph of the narrative imagination in which the wish has become for the moment equivalent to the deed. But note that it is the child and mother who together succeed, as if it is the very fact of complicity between them that accomplishes the trick. It seems that it is not enough for the child alone to believe in the power of pretence. Confirmation is sought, not from the creatures of fantasy - witches, godmothers, fairies, genies - but from those who are nearest and dearest.

The drawing below the text signals the moment of magic. The mouse lies prostrate between mother and child, as if on an operating:

The little girl and her mum pretended to be the vet and soon got the mouse better.

Even so the mouse was better when the little girl and her mum still kept it and played.

Pages four and five of The Poorly Mouse.
table. But there are no instruments to be seen. While the child looks straight ahead, her arms half raised as if in hope, the mother faces the mouse, stretching out an arm in a nurturing gesture. Next moment, as we know from the text above, the mouse will be on its feet again. Our eyes are already straying onto the facing page.

Page Five: **Even now the mouse was better the little girl and her mum still kept it and played with it. They had lots of fun.**

The drawings on Pages Four and Five form a pair. This particular drawing does not accompany the text under which it is placed. Both in

The drawing below the text signals the moment of magic.

time and in narrative sequence it anticipates the text by picturing the fulfillment of the magic of the previous page. The mouse stands upright, flourishing its tail and gazing out at the reader as if in triumph while mother and daughter turn towards it, each of them now standing and smiling, admiring both the mouse and their own success. Meanwhile the words above the drawing have moved the story on, demonstrating again the variety of ways in which Jessica relates written to drawn text as her story unfolds.

When Jessica read her story on tape, some time after reading it in assembly, she read the second word as "though" rather than "now". Whichever reading is adopted, a trace of ambiguity enters the story at this point, as if, in keeping the mouse despite its recovery, mother and child are infringing the boundary of the permissible. If we have already read the story, we know that the magical achievement celebrated in the drawing on this page is about to unravel. Jessica, after all, is not content with the triumph of pretence. Her narrative vision is more complex. There is another side to the story which must now be given its due.

For all that, the overwhelming feeling on this page is one of mutual delight. We have entered that time out of time which I have already mentioned. The magic of pretence has released the three protagonists into a world in which, for a while, nothing obstructs their common pleasure in play. Momentarily they are free of the constraints of reality. "They had lots of fun."

Page Six: **Then, after a while, the dad came back from his holiday.**

Enter the father, not so much the villain as a kind of *deus ex machina*. "Then after a while..." As anxious teachers we might be tempted to question the need for the world "then" but we would be wrong. Two times are inscribed here: the time of event, of the next stage in the unfolding plot, and the time of duration - "after a while". Mother and child have been liberated into a magical world of play as if all time were theirs. But it cannot last. Now the father returns to bring play to an end. By calling him "the dad" Jessica seems to emphasise the archetypal character of this father but the significance of her definite article lies more in the need to preserve the bond that exists throughout the story between mother and child. If she had written "the little girl's dad she would have too readily separated mother and daughter. She might have avoided the problem by naming the father but this is a story without names. To that extent all the characters in the story are archetypes.

How strange it should be the father who returns from holiday. [I asked Jessica why the father had been on holiday on his own. All she would say was that usually the family would have gone on holiday together but this time the dad had chosen to go by himself.] The real holiday has been the magical

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Pages six and seven of *The Poohy Mouse*
holiday of mother, child and mouse, the imaginative complicity from which the father is excluded. Perhaps that is Jessica's point. Though the dad comes home from his own holiday, it is those who have stayed at home who have experienced, in his absence, the most significant freedom. Neither holiday, it seems, can last. Reality intrudes upon magic, separating once more the worlds of the animal and the human. The fairy tale world will now close back on itself, as it does at the end of Angela Carter's marvellous farewell to the fairy tale, Peter and the Wolf, although in neither case can we believe this farewell to be final.

The drawing is stark. Father and mother confront each other across an empty space. The father's head is spiky and hard, like the harsh sun on the opening page. The mother's mouth is open in what might be a shout of welcome or a cry of alarm. Child and mouse alike have disappeared. The adults confront each other alone.

Page Seven: He didn't like animals so the mouse went back to his old home.

The story's ending is uncertain. We don't know what awaits the mouse in his old home, "near where the wolves lived", although in conversation both Jessica and her friend Melissa expressed confidence that the mouse would survive. The father's motivation is given as his dis-

An inattentive reading can easily overlook the subtlety of a six year old's prose.

like of animals yet he can speak to the mouse in apology. Perhaps the words "sorry, you have to leave" express something of the inevitability of an end of magic.

This is the only picture which incorporates written text. The words are placed in the picture in part simply because they are spoken. Like most children, Jessica appropriates without difficulty the conventions of the comic strip. But these words are also necessary if we are to understand the complexity of the father's attitude. We can see from their gestures the different responses of mother, child and father to the mouse's departure, but without words we could not be sure of the father's apologetic tone. The words add a subtlety which is as yet beyond Jessica's visual scope.

This final drawing is a curtain call, a farewell to the reader as much as to the mouse. All three characters face the reader, announcing variously their sentiments. The father's hands remain by his side; only his words evoke apology. The girl waves her hand which has now grown almost as large as her face. The mother waves too, but more sedately, her hand still, as everywhere else, a button. In front the mouse sets off on the bumpy path back home. Its departure is double edged. There is danger in the woods but the mouse will no longer be "kept". Its own world beckons. "Then he determinedly set his face towards the town and tramped onwards, into a different story." The words are Angela Carter's but they capture the sense of this ending. Not so much "and they all lived happily ever after", more a case of "and now what next?"

FOUR

What, then, does this story tell us about a young child's narrative imagination? I want to emphasize two aspects of Jessica's storytelling: her relationship to tradition and the largeness of her narrative concerns. The two aspects are closely linked.

Jessica's achievement is inconceivable outside of the narrative traditions to which she already has access by way of the books which have been read to her or which she has now begun to read for herself, the stories which she has heard and told and retold, the culture of narrative which infuses her environment. These traditions include the folk tale and the fairy tale, the family story, the picture book, the early reader, the comic strip, the cartoon, the playground fantasy and much else besides. The Poorly Mouse, like Jessica's other stories and those of her companions, is in no way independent of such traditions. It is bound to them at every turn. How could it be otherwise?

But to work from inside a tradition is never simply to reproduce the given. "Let us understand by this term," Ricoeur recommends, "not the inert transmission of one already dead deposit of material but the living transmission of an innovation always capable of being reactivated by a return to the most creative moments of poetic activity." Imitation and innovation are the twin faces of tradition. What The Poorly
Mouse shows us is that the innovative face, no less than the imitative, reaches back as far as the genetic history of narrative itself.

Jessica reactivates tradition in a variety of ways. I think of how she juxtaposes and integrates picture and text, or interweaves folk tale with family saga, or uses the turn of the page to punctuate her narrative. Innovation comes naturally to her but it is gauged by necessity. Where words fail her, in imagining the beauty and terror of the wood where the mouse lives close by the wolf, or in detailing the preoccupation of the vet in his surgery, drawn images come to her aid. Conversely, when the significance of a pencilled gesture is insufficient to convey her meaning, a speech bubble makes good the deficiency. By such means constraints can be redefined as opportunities.

This bond between constraint and opportunity is nowhere more apparent than in Jessica’s distinctive use of language. Her vocabulary is limited, more particularly so in the context of the written as compared with the spoken word. She is compelled to achieve large effects by slender means. Words like “pretended”, “poorly”, “busy” evoke special resonance, while the simplest connectives - “so”, “then”, “after a while”, “both” - are almost overwhelmed with meaning. An inattentive reading can easily overlook the subtlety of a six year old’s prose. We have to work hard to appreciate the richness of the economy which young children like Jessica learn to exploit in their early written narratives.

In the end, what strikes me most about Jessica’s storytelling is the sincerity of her commitment to narrative. Her story touches upon so many of the fundamental puzzles of childhood, as of narrative itself. How does magic fare in relation to reality? Who controls access and who gains access to the magical world? What are the limits of companionship between the human and animal kingdoms? Where does care end and play begin? What sense can be made of conflict and complicity within the family? Where lies the source of authority and whose authority counts? How fine is the borderline between being free and being kept? How close can we come to understanding one another? The Poorly Mouse does not aim to resolve these questions nor even to raise them. It’s rather that the narrative winds its way through them, turning the questions over, exploring implications, establishing relationships, suggesting new puzzles, complicating issues, alternately offering and cancelling possibilities.

Perhaps this is no less than we should expect. I have presented Jessica and her classmates as children for whom the writing of stories has become a way of appropriating a literary inheritance. If this is true, then by the same measure writing stories will necessarily be for Jessica a way of exploring the central questions of her culture, whether in ethics, citizenship, science, art of religion. For children at least, narrative may well be a privileged means of speculating on culture, if only because, as we have seen, it offers both immediate and disciplined access to the heart of a culture’s concerns. Privileged or not, telling a story and reflecting on experience are activities which, in the writing of a narrative such as The Poorly Mouse, have become inseparable. Their inseparability is both source and substance of Jessica’s achievement.

Interpretation is completed not in the act of reading itself but in the representation to a child of the teacher’s understanding of her work.

FIVE

To make up a plot is to engage in a critical practice. The Poorly Mouse shows us something of what that practice looks like in the early years. How is it to be recognised, promoted and sustained? To answer this question would be to provide a pedagogy, though of a kind which the authors and managers of the national curriculum might be hard put to recognise. It is a heady enterprise and beyond the scope of this essay. But one feature of such a pedagogy is already present in everything that I have had to say about his story, and that is the central role of interpretation.

I set out to demonstrate a way of reading a six year old’s text. From a teacher’s perspective, however, interpretation is always more than a way of reading a text, more even than a way of describing an author’s intention and achievement. It is completed not in the act of reading itself but in the representation to a child of the teacher’s understanding of her work. That representation may take an almost limitless variety of forms. We may ask Jessica about the meaning of particular words and images in her narrative, about what she has left out of her story and why, about the sequence of events, circumstances, devices and impediments that make up the plot, about the ending. We may draw connections between this story and others which she has written or between this story and stories which she may have read or listened to. We may describe our own feelings about the characters in the tale - mouse, wolf, girl, mum, dad and vet - and wonder about their past histories or future prospects. We may propose new stories for Jessica to read, new picture books, for example, in which to explore the interweaving of drawn and printed text. We may invite her to act the story out with her friends, or to give a reading to another class or in assembly. We may ask her to compare her own story with her friend Melissa’s story, written at the same time, wondering about similarities and
To tell a story is to redefine the world. At the age of six Jessica has already begun to learn how.

Seen in this way, interpretation deserves to be considered foremost among the teacher’s many functions. To tell a story is to redefine the world. At the age of six Jessica has already begun to learn how. A teacher’s responsibility to Jessica and her companions is to conspire with them to keep the plot alive.

changing minds

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