

SEEING THE STUDENT

Teaching is an interactive practice that begins and ends with seeing the student. This is more complicated than it seems, for it is something that is ongoing and never completely finished. The student grows and changes, the teacher learns, the situation shifts, and seeing becomes an evolving challenge. As layers of mystification and obfuscation are peeled away, as the student becomes more fully present to the teacher, experiences and ways of thinking and knowing that were initially obscure become the ground on which an authentic and vital teaching practice can be constructed.

Our youngest child came into our family when he was fourteen months old—unexpected, unannounced. Chesa was set adrift when his biological parents—close, long-time friends of ours—could no longer care for him. His grandparents kept him for a short time, and then he came to us.

For a long time, he was an easy child—agreeable, eager to please, perhaps a bit compliant. He was never fussy, never demanding. On the other side, he never displayed much enthusiasm: His play lacked commitment and his explorations of the world were tentative. He watched his new brothers at play, one of them almost four years older, and the other just half a year older, but he joined in rather reluctantly. He was subject to every sore throat and ear infection that came near him, and both his physical strength and his affect seemed always at low ebb. He was downcast, depressed. Later his depression gave way to an explosive anger, often self-directed. He was clumsy, both physically and socially, and he would frequently crash into people and things—often hurting himself or angering others—and afterwards genuinely wonder what had happened.

Chesa also had qualities that could help him negotiate and take control of his life. One was a dogged determination—a willingness to work and work and work at a task or a challenge until he succeeded. During a fund-raiser for his swim team, he swam lap after graceless

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lap, the slowest on the team but also the last to emerge from the water. When his mind was set, he never gave up and he never gave in, no matter what. Another quality was his keen intelligence and his steel-trap memory. His report of events or conversations was filled with color, nuance, and detail. Finally, he could be incredibly compassionate and unexpectedly generous. Each of these qualities, of course, could be experienced in two ways: his iron will could be seen as stubbornness or resoluteness; his memory as acute or obsessive; his sweetness as strong or weak.

As he set off for first grade we were painfully aware of the many ways Chesa might be experienced, of the many ways he could be seen as a student. There was his obstinacy, for example. There was the matter of anger and temper and the highly visible issue of plowing into people. Who would his teacher see coming through the door? How would she know our wonderful child?

We were lucky. Chesa's teacher was a young man named Kevin Sweeney who admired his strengths and quickly figured out interesting and clever ways to leverage these against his weaknesses. For example, he gave Chesa cleaning tasks almost every day—not the routine stuff, but tasks that tapped into his work-horse nature. "Chesa, could you wash these shelves this afternoon? Just move the paper over here and then use a bucket of soapy water and a sponge." This not only focused Chesa on a goal, but it made a worthwhile quality more visible to the other children and to himself, and this, in turn, made him a stronger, more accepted group member. Furthermore, it provided the teacher with a steady reminder of something to value in Chesa, a challenging child for much of the day.

All of this came back to me when I was working with a group of ten-year-old boys in an inner city public school. I showed them a simple structure for writing a brief, autobiographical sketch or poem. The first line is your first name, followed by a line of three words that describe you to yourself. The next line is something you love, then something you hate, something you fear, and something you wish for. The last line is your last name. I gave the kids an example:

I am Martin
courageous non-violent warrior
I love all people
I hate oppression
I am afraid of ignorance
I wish for freedom
King.

Hannibal pointed out that I had left out "Luther," which was right, so we made the last line, "Luther King." Now they made poems for themselves:

I am Hannibal
fluky but funny
I love the Bulls
I hate being whipped
I am afraid of Freddy
I wish for Michael Jordan to come over
Johnson.

I am Aaron
small, black, frightened
I love my mom
I hate being picked on
I am afraid of the raper man and the police
I wish for happiness
Blackwell.

When I had asked his teacher if Aaron could join me for an hour on this morning, as he had on other occasions, she had practically pushed him out the door. "He's no good today," she had said. "His mind is wandering and he doesn't want to work." Now I looked at Aaron again. He was small, frail really, and he did look frightened. He smiled a lot, but always apologetically, looking down, unsure. He was quiet, never initiating talk or play, always reacting. His face was streaked, his hair uncombed, and his eyes were puffy and resting on large dark circles. I wondered: Why is Aaron frightened? Who are the police in his life? What is the happiness he wishes for?

As we talked about his poem and about some of my questions, I learned that the raper man was a large character in his life, someone Aaron could describe physically, even though he had never seen him. The raper man had huge hands and was ugly, with big, red bumps on his face. He drove an old, wrecked car, and he was often sighted by other children on the walk from school to home, so Aaron and his little sister mainly ran home each day. The police loomed large: While he didn't know any of them himself, two of his brothers had had frequent encounters with the law. Aaron told me a long story about one brother, James, who had been falsely accused of gang membership and arrested in a playground for "just being there." Aaron had visited James yesterday in Cook County Jail, he told me, and today

James would go on trial for first-degree murder. "My mom says maybe he'll come home this week if the judge sees he didn't do it."

No wonder his teacher said: "He's no good today. His mind is wandering and he doesn't want to work." I ask myself if I'd be any good with my own brother on trial for murder, or if I could concentrate on work sheets with all this going on. And then I think of his mother, and I wonder what her hopes are for Aaron in school. I think of her in light of our hopes for Chesa, and of our good fortune in having him known and understood by Kevin Sweeney. What could this mother tell any teacher about Aaron that would be of use? Would the teacher or anyone else in the school care? Would they find a way to teach him?

When we teachers look out over our classrooms, what do we see? Half-civilized barbarians? Savages? A collection of deficits, or IQs, or averages? Do we see fellow creatures? We see students in our classrooms, of course, but who are they? What hopes do they bring? What is the language of their dreams? What experiences have they had, and where do they want to go? What interests or concerns them, how have they been hurt, what are they frightened of, what will they fight for, and what and whom do they care about? What is their bliss? Their pain?

When I began teaching, we were told that many of our students were "culturally deprived." This became a strong, germinal idea for some teachers, and cultural deprivation was being unearthed and remediated all over the place. We assumed it was an actual condition, like freckles, that was a piece of some kids. It didn't take long, however, for cultural deprivation as a concept to come in for some serious and sustained questioning: Is calling someone "culturally deprived" the same as calling them not white, not middle class? Is Spanish a "lower" language than English? Is the implication, then, that some cultures are superior and others inferior? Or that some children have a culture and others do not? What is culture anyway? In time, the concept of cultural deprivation was discredited as patronizing and untrue, and it fell into disuse.

Unhappily, labeling students has become even more widespread in the intervening years—it is an epidemic in our schools, a toxic habit with no known limits. It's as if supervisors, coordinators, and administrators have nothing better to do than to mumble knowingly about "soft signs," "attention deficit disorder," or "low impulse control,"

and all the rest of us stand around smiling, pretending to know what they're talking about. The categories keep splintering and proliferating, getting nuttier as they go: L.D., B.D., E.H., T.A.G., E.M.H. It's almost impossible for teachers today not to see before them "gifted and talented" students, "learning disabled" youngsters, and children "at risk." I recently asked a scholar who had just presented a major research paper at a professional conference on "at-risk" students to give me a brief definition of "at-risk," using, I insisted, only "Peter Rabbit English." He said flatly, "Black or Hispanic, poor, and from a single-parent household." "At risk" is simply "cultural deprivation" recycled for today. And, most important, "at risk" is no one's self-definer—I've worked in tough situations forever, and never met a kid who said, "Hi, I'm Maria, and I'm at risk."

The problem is this: in the human-centered act of teaching, all attempts to create definitive categories lower our sights, misdirect our vision, and mislead our intentions. Labels are limiting. They offer a single lens concentrated on a specific deficit when what we need are multiple ways of seeing a child's ever-changing strengths. All the categories are upside down—they conceal more than they reveal. They are abstract, when what we need is immediate and concrete. The focusing questions for effective teachers must be these: Who is this person before me? What are his interests and areas of wonder? How does she express herself and what is her awareness of herself as a learner? What effort and potential does she bring? These are the kinds of questions we need to attend to.

If I were to brainstorm a list of things I can't do or can't do well, things I don't understand or care about, activities that make me seem incompetent or feel ridiculous, I could fill a chalkboard in just a few seconds. Let's see: I can't type or use the computer, I can't speak French, I don't fish, I can't fix the car, I can't play tennis, I don't understand golf, I don't know how a television works, I can't read music, I'm lousy at chess, I can't play the trumpet, I can't repair the refrigerator, and on and on. Most of these would be useful things to know; each could, in fact, be interesting and worthwhile.

Now imagine some school administrator or teacher constructing a curriculum to correct these deficiencies in me. I might attend remedial auto shop three mornings a week, resource room refrigerator maintenance and TV repair on alternate days, take the slow French class every afternoon, and so on. The goal may well be to make me a

more skilled and a better person, but the result would likely be alienation, disinterest, and failure. You see, I have no interest in learning to fix cars. I simply don't care about it. I don't own a TV and have no burning desire to know how they work. I have no particular skill in refrigeration, no particular aptitude in foreign language or music. Most of this curriculum would be distant from me, and some of it would even frighten me—the tennis lessons, for example, would make me look like a fool in front of my classmates. All in all this attempt to fix me would likely make me feel bad, and could well drive me completely away from school.

The list of my deficiencies (dramatically shortened here to preserve some shred of self-respect) is, of course, true but inadequate. There is no distinction, for example, between items that might intimidate but also attract and fascinate me, like using the computer, and items that hold absolutely no allure, like golf or fishing. Furthermore, this list tells you very little of importance about me. You don't know, for example, that I ride my bicycle to work every day and that I know a lot about bikes. You don't know that I love movies and jazz and baseball. You don't know that I am a good baker and an excellent, inventive cook, nor that I cook like I teach, with some broad framework of planning but without strict recipes. You don't know that I found some nice baby eggplants at the market yesterday, and that I let them lead me into dinner—and that only afterwards could I construct a recipe for interested guests, explaining how the eggplant made me think of ginger, and how I then found some garlic and an onion, a bottle of old wine, and so on.

Not only does the list of incompetencies fail to tell you anything of what I know or care about, it also doesn't tell you anything about my temperament or disposition of mind—that I tend to be supportive and nurturing, for example, and that I am an intrepid (sometimes meddling) interpersonal problem solver. It doesn't tell you anything about how I learn—that I read slowly, for example, and retain only what I have told someone else. As I look at it, the deficiencies list tells you almost nothing about me—about my experiences, needs, dreams, fears, skills, or know-how—and as a teacher it provides you with information of only distant, peripheral value. It doesn't offer you any insight or clues into how you might engage me in a journey of learning, or how you might invite me into your classroom as a student. In short, the list fails to answer the key question: Given what I know now, how shall I teach this person?

Finally, the list makes me feel rotten as a learner. I want to feel strong and healthy, secure, independent, connected as a worthwhile

member of the group. When these qualities are nurtured and supplied with opportunity, I can act with surprising courage—I can take criticism, be a good ally to others, face up to my shortcomings and failures, keep going against all odds, experiment in new realms. In other words, my ability to exercise my mind with hope and sureness is linked to my emotional state, my feelings, my affect. When they are disregarded, I—like most people—hold back, cringe a bit, and the possibility of a productive formal education narrows.

In the odd, often upside-down world of schools, we typically start in the wrong place. We start with what kids can't do and don't know. It's as if we brainstormed a list for each of them as I did for myself, that we figured out what they don't understand or value, what they feel incompetent or insecure about, and we then developed a curriculum to remediate each deficiency. The curriculum is built on a deficit-model; it is built on repairing weakness. And it simply doesn't work.

It isn't that educators don't mean well. Youngsters do indeed need access to certain literacies and skills if they are to function fully and well in our society. And it isn't as if there are no students who learn: Children are learning all the time, and not just what we think we are teaching them. The irony is that the students who tend to succeed in school learn in spite of—not because of—our treatments. And those who fail in school are subject to the most relentless and concentrated attack on their weaknesses—seemingly to no avail.

The framework for the almighty lesson plan—that daily, classroom-level reminder of this whole approach—neatly embodies the deficit approach: It is linear, one-directional, incremental, and entirely outside the student. Lesson plans typically begin with behavioral objectives, as in, "Students will understand vowel blends," or "Students will multiply double-digit numbers." They then describe the materials needed, the activities that will occur, and how it all fits together within some larger plan. It is all very neat, all seemingly objective. The problem is that this has nothing to do with how people learn, it never captures the complexity of classroom life nor the idiosyncratic, tumultuous individual pathways to knowledge. Students will understand vowel blends? How about Eric, in the back of the class? He's thinking about what he's going to do later when he sees Brian. How about James, ambling aimlessly to the pencil sharpener again? He never does well in reading or on these work sheets anyway. The teacher experiences the problems but feels somewhat trapped: "I've got thirty other children, and I have to think of everyone, not just those not doing well. I try to work with them individually when I can, of course, but they have to make some effort. In any case their grades will reflect

both their efforts and what they have learned.” Exactly. Eric and James already know they are bad students, they are already drifting, and all of this is simply confirmation. Operating, as it does, without reference to the students themselves, this deficiency-driven approach is self-justifying and closed: Some will learn and some will not, some will work hard and others won’t, some will make it and some will fall away. It’s all quite predictable.

If this conclusion is objectionable—and I believe it is entirely unacceptable to those of us engaged in teaching as a moral act, or teaching as an intellectual challenge—there must be another approach. We must find ways to break with the deficit-driven model, and we must move away from teaching as a way of attacking incompetencies, teaching as uncovering perceived deficiencies and constructing micro-units for repair. We must find a better way, a way that builds on strengths, experiences, skills, and abilities; a way that engages the whole person and guides that person to greater fulfillment and power. I am reminded of the plea of a Native American parent whose five-year-old son had been labeled a “slow learner”: “Wind-Wolf knows the names and migration patterns of more than forty birds. He knows there are thirteen tail feathers on a perfectly balanced eagle. What he needs is a teacher who knows his full measure” (Lake, 1990, p. 48).

Most teachers want to know the full measure of their students. We want to understand what motivates them and makes them tick, what engages and interests them, and we want to know why they act as they do. We want to be more effective—to maximize those satisfying moments when we reach children, and minimize the frustrations of seeing everything we try fall flat. And while we have become accustomed to scores and grades, we often want to know more than we can possibly learn by relying on an objective, impersonal standard, whether it be a grade-level average, a test result, or a letter or number assigned to potential or achievement.

Teachers need to be one part detective: We sift the clues children leave, follow the leads, and diligently uncover the facts in order to fill out and make credible the story of their growth and development. We need to be one part researcher: collecting data, analyzing information, testing hypotheses. Teachers need to be one part world-class puzzle master, painstakingly fitting together the tiny pieces of some mammoth, intricate jigsaw of childhood. And we need to be all of this with a significant difference: Our story never ends with a neat conclusion,

our data is mostly unruly and insufficient, and our jigsaw puzzle is always incomplete because it is always fluid, always changing. Whatever truths we discover are contingent; our facts are tentative. This is because we are interested in children—living, breathing, squirming, growing, moving, messy, idiosyncratic children. Just when we have gained some worthwhile insight, just when we have captured some interesting essence, the children change, the kaleidoscope turns, and we must look again, even more deeply.

We must find a way, too, to ground our observations in many dimensions at once: intellectual, cultural, physical, spiritual, emotional. In looking more deeply, we must try to see beyond our own stereotypes and prejudices, beyond some notion of how children ought to behave filtered through smoky, uncritical childhood memory. We must see beyond the unstated assumption driving most schools, the wacky idea that children are puny, inadequate adults and that the job of education is to transport them as quickly as possible from that sorry state. We must look unblinkingly at the way children really are, and struggle to make sense of everything that we see in order to teach them.

Theories of child development, including developmental psychology, can help by reminding us that childhood is a unique, distinct time and place in the growth of a person. Jean Piaget, for example, can alert us to the ways in which young children's thinking is concrete and immediate compared with the thinking of older children; Erik Erikson can underline the importance of identity and broadening group affiliation for adolescents. We can notice the ways that human meanings shift qualitatively as we grow. We need to remember, certainly, that childhood has its own validity, that it is not simply a functional stage or a preparation for life; that a child's life is a full life nonetheless. Perhaps most important, theorists like Piaget—if we take his method seriously—can demonstrate the power of intense observation, careful questioning, respectful listening and detailed record keeping in our quest to understand the child. Too often we accept theory as doctrine—we speak a half-language of slogans and formulas. We become immunized against complexity, or worse, we use developmental theory to build a curriculum designed to hurry children through the “stages of development,” thereby abandoning, for example, Piaget's fascination with how the child knows. In this way, child development, too, becomes dogma, another obstacle in our attempt to accurately see the student.

Observing children purposefully and carefully is a way to get to know them, a way to look more deeply. We need as full and realistic

a picture as possible of the child in motion—interacting, choosing, constructing, learning, responding, functioning. That picture will be an action shot, probably a little blurry around the edges but a picture that can strengthen the teacher's ability to teach. While groups certainly have their own rhythms, patterns, and demands, observations of individual children are essential. Observing individual children helps us to keep in mind that each child is different, and each is his or her own universe.

Here, for example, are classroom notes I made about a student over several months:

Ashley is a delightful child, rewarding to work with, an enthusiastic, energetic three-year-old. She has an expressive face and body, big dark eyes, round cheeks, malleable features. When she laughs, her whole body releases and roars. When she cries she is convulsed with sobs from head to foot. When she clowns, she's a cartoon.

Ashley is small-boned, a well-coordinated runner and climber, strong, agile, and healthy. She meets the world with all her senses—tasting the sand, painting her face, smelling the clay and then squeezing it between her fingers, scooping the fish out of the tank—operating out of a strong bodily base.

Ashley spends a large part of the day in dramatic play—sometimes with the blocks, sometimes in the dress-up area, and often just spontaneously while reading or painting. At lunch one day recently, Ashley sat with Kate. Each child had brought a doll to the table. Ashley turned to Kate and said, "Here, baby, eat your cereal." She held out a spoonful of apple sauce, which Kate took into her mouth. Ashley smiled and started to feed Kate, stroking her hair lightly and watching her intently, face tipped downward, eyebrows raised, speaking in an exaggerated, patronizing voice: "Good baby. Eat your cereal." Kate was willing, and after lunch Ashley took her hand and led her off to brush her teeth.

At the sand table another morning she played with four or five kids for twenty minutes. Her body was relaxed and loose as she leaned forward over the edge, balancing on one foot, her mouth relaxed, lips slightly parted. "This is tea," she said scooping sand into a large cup and then pouring it out. "Now here's an egg," not speaking to anyone in particular. Later: "Now I made rice and beans." Finally she drifted away and went to the record player. She put on the record "Annie" and sang "Tomor-

row" by herself, swaying in front of the record player, acting, spreading her arms wide and affecting a performing style.

Ashley is often the first to arrive. One day she dashed easily into the room, smiling and shouting my name: "Bill." She wheeled around beaming to her mother and patted Kathy's pregnant belly, repeating "Bill! Bill!"

"What do you have there?"

"My baby!" she shouted and exploded in laughter.

"You can hold it, Bill."

This was new, because for weeks she had said that no one could hold the new baby when it arrived.

She slithered out of her coat and skipped once around the room, looking at the bagels and butter on the table, touching the turtle, tapping an easel. She returned and sat on a chair near where Kathy was unpacking her things.

"Put my shoes on, mama," she said matter-of-factly.

"I'm busy," said Kathy, "but I'll be with you in a minute.

Why don't you loosen the laces to your boots?"

Ashley did this agreeably, concentrating hard. After her mother helped her on with her soft shoes she hopped to the table and took a hearty bite of a bagel. "Mmm, butter," she crooned.

Kathy said goodbye and left. "Bye, bye," Ashley called after her. Arrivals haven't always been easy. Sometimes Ashley cries and wants to be held, but Kathy is always direct and easy with her, following a consistent pattern every day.

Soon two others arrived and joined her at the table. She said hello to each, then nodding she said: "You can hold my baby, José. And especially Asha can hold it." The other two seem oblivious to the treasure that they have been offered.

When the bagels were done, she cried out: "Let's go up here." She flew to the ladder and gracefully pulled herself up to the loft. She quickly assembled a square of blocks with a window. She concentrated hard and didn't seem to notice two more arrivals, even though one parent was insistent on praising her work. After ten minutes she called out, "Hey, Asha. The spaceship is ready." Three kids joined her and she gave them each some colored cubes and said, "Here are the batteries," and demonstrated how she wanted them put into the windows.

One day several kids were tracing their hands on white paper and coloring them in. Ashley carefully colored her hand brown,

intent on filling in all the spaces. When she was done she flipped the paper over and drew two large hand-like shapes, leaving one white and coloring the other black. "This is Jim," she said pointing to the white hand, "and this is Kathy."

Ashley is intently interested in color and race. Her mother is Jamaican and black, her father is Jewish and white. For a long time, her favorite book was *Black is Brown is Tan*, a children's book about an interracial family, and she called it, "My book."

She recently asked one of the teachers what color he was. The teacher replied: "What do you think?"

"No, No, I asked you first."

"OK, I'm white," he said. She then asked about several kids, black and white, and he answered each time. At the end she said contentedly, "Yep, you got them all right."

Ashley often ties a piece of yarn into her hair and calls it her ponytail, "Just like Sarah's." Last week she said Kathy wasn't her mother because Kathy looks just like her friend Abdul.

"Mommy found me in a store and liked me so she bought me." She was serious and intent, trying it out.

Later she asked me: "Do you know what color my new baby will be?"

"I think so."

"Brown, just like me."

Attending to the details of one child at a time can develop a richer understanding of that person, of course, and it can simultaneously strengthen a deeper and more powerful understanding of all children, for it sensitizes teachers to detail, to their own ability to observe and understand, and to similarities and differences between children. Child observation is especially important in situations where structures obscure our vision and depersonalize students, where classes are large, for example, paper work, forms, and standardized ways of looking at kids entrenched, and where teachers have no regular, formal way of discussing children together.

The goal of observation is understanding, not some imagined objectivity. If a teacher is invested in and fascinated by a child—if the child is a "favorite"—this is not a problem. The teacher will always be working to understand and teach that child. The problem is when the child is unseen, invisible, or not cared for—and this is not a problem of objectivity but of commitment. Pushing oneself to see and observe and understand this child—and every child—is an act of compassion and an important part of teaching.

Interpretation has as big a place in observing children as description does: One tells more about the speaker, the other more about the child, but both are necessary. Self-awareness and knowing students are both part of the intellectual challenge of teaching. Here are classroom notes I made, around the same time, on two other students:

José and Abdul are the roughhousers, disrupters, firecrackers. It is common to see them roaring from the loft to the book area, through the art area, around the room and back to the loft, knocking things over, yelling and chasing.

Between them, José is the leader, often the aggressor and the energizer. He is not the least activity-oriented, but seems mainly to be involved, even in his calmer moments, in exploring the space, touching, discarding, moving on, touching something else. José is a gate-keeper, constantly protecting his and Abdul's relationship by hitting, pushing, telling kids, "you aren't our friend," fighting to sit next to Abdul at lunch. Often, if Abdul initiates a block-building project, José will stand at the head of the stairs, his legs and arms spread to keep everyone out, literally guarding the gate.

Abdul loves José, waits for him quietly each day and lights up when he comes bursting in. When José doesn't come, Abdul is quiet, gentle and cooperative. He seems innocent enough, very sweet and wide-eyed. He'll play with several kids until José comes; then it is only José and him, which is the way José wants it.

José and Abdul are not a popular leadership group, except at times like rest time when they tap a group nerve and can lead a general uprising. I remember kids like José from my childhood; I had boundless admiration for someone who could be so uninhibited and so irreverent. They're both adorable.

For all children, it is better to have a caring, self-aware teacher who is haphazard when it comes to record-keeping than a detailed and particular record-keeper who is careless about kids. Nevertheless, beyond a lot of informal "taking in" of the child, more formal observations and record-keeping can be of enormous value. This takes time, but it is not impossible, even in large groups. And it is not necessarily time away from teaching; it can be built centrally into the structure of the day. Some teachers keep a pad and pencil handy so that they can jot notes during the day to be filled in outside of school; others have a tape recorder available for quick observations. Vivian Gussin Paley,

a teacher who has documented her classroom experiences through an impressive series of books over several years, uses and reuses a single cassette, which she calls her “disciplinarian,” a technique that pushes her to transcribe and make sense of material soon after it is recorded. Taking a moment to step back from the group and focus on one student, keeping a running record of everything that that student does while solving a problem, working with some material, or interacting with others can yield a rich harvest of information about learning style, preference and approach, maturity, and disposition of mind.

Much of the time of record-keeping is time outside of school, it is time in the evenings or on the weekends. It is useful for some teachers to keep a journal or diary, to have a daily record of memorable events and reflections. Again there is no pretense of constructing an objective record; the goal, instead, is to create an instrument for thinking about teaching and children in a critical, sustained way. Not only is the journal an instrument for thinking and planning and harvesting ideas, but, over time, a journal will contain many little pieces about this or that child, bits that can be brought together when seeking a deeper understanding of growth and development, or when preparing to discuss this child with parents or colleagues. It is useful, as well, to write anecdotal records every week concerning ten or fifteen students. Again, over several weeks a teacher can gather a lot of information—including, for example, which students are not noticed; who might be falling through the cracks.

It is useful, if understanding students is a central goal, to afford children multiple opportunities to choose, to initiate, to create during some part of classroom life. This might take the form of “choice time” in a primary classroom, a time when children can decide which activity to pursue and the teacher can observe the various choices and make a few brief notes on the work of particular kids as they pursue their interests. In a classroom of older students, this might take the form of a project time, an independent research time, a free-reading time, or simply a break time, when youngsters can talk among themselves. Again, the teacher can note choices made and approaches to work, play, and relationship.

Parents are a powerful, usually underutilized source of knowledge about youngsters. Parents are too often made to feel unwelcome in schools, and we too often dismiss their insights as subjective and overly involved. In fact, the insights of parents—urgent, invested, pas-

sionate, immediate—are exactly what we need. Here, for example, is a letter to a teacher from a Native American mother whose son is about to start school (this has been copied and passed widely among educators, but has not, to my knowledge, been published, and the author is unknown):

Before you take charge of the classroom that contains my child, please ask yourself why you are going to teach Indian children. What are your expectations? What rewards do you anticipate? . . .

Write down and examine all the information and opinions you possess about Indians. What are the stereotypes and untested assumptions that you bring with you into the classroom? How many negative attitudes towards Indians will you put before my child? . . .

Too many teachers, unfortunately, seem to see their role as rescuer. My child does not need to be rescued; he does not consider being Indian a misfortune. He has a culture, probably older than yours; he has meaningful values and a rich and varied experiential background. However strange or incomprehensible it may seem to you, you have no right to do or say anything that implies to him that it is less than satisfactory . . .

Like most Indian children his age, he is competent. He can dress himself, prepare a meal for himself, clean up afterwards, care for a younger child. He knows his Reserve, all of which is his home, like the back of his hand.

He is not accustomed to having to ask permission to do the ordinary things that are part of normal living. He is seldom forbidden to do anything; more usually the consequences of an action are explained to him, and he is allowed to decide for himself whether or not to act. His entire existence since he has been old enough to see and hear has been an experiential learning situation, arranged to provide him with the opportunity to develop his skills and confidence in his own capacities. Didactic teaching will be an alien experience for him . . .

He has been taught, by precept, that courtesy is an essential part of human conduct and rudeness is any action that makes another person feel stupid or foolish. Do not mistake his patient courtesy for indifference or passivity.

He doesn't speak standard English, but he is in no way "linguistically handicapped." If you will take the time and courtesy to listen and observe carefully, you will see that he and the other Indian children communicate very well, both among themselves

and with other Indians. They speak “functional” English, very effectively augmented by their fluency in the silent language, the subtle, unspoken communication of facial expressions, gestures, body movement, and the use of personal space.

You will be well advised to remember that our children are skillful interpreters of the silent language. They will know your feelings and attitudes with unerring precision, no matter how carefully you arrange your smile or modulate your voice. They will learn in your classroom, because children learn involuntarily. What they learn will depend on you.

Will you help my child to learn to read, or will you teach him that he has a reading problem? Will you help him develop problem solving skills, or will you teach him that school is where you try to guess what answer the teacher wants?

Will he learn that his sense of his own value and dignity is valid, or will he learn that he must forever be apologetic and “trying harder” because he isn’t white? Can you help him acquire the intellectual skills he needs without at the same time imposing your values on top of those he already has?

Respect my child. He is a person. He has a right to be himself

Inviting letters from parents is one way to learn from them. Another is to structure opportunities for them to be powerful in their access to school, the classroom, and the teacher. For example, I have always given parents of my students my phone number and address, something that colleagues sometimes considered unwise in big city schools where parents are often seen as the enemy. I found ways to socialize with parents outside of school and to bring them into class as tutors, aids, and experts. Everyone, after all, is an expert on his or her own life; many are also experts at something interesting but not available in the conventional curriculum—carving, sewing, playing mah jong. Bringing parents into focus can be useful to youngsters and also to teachers—after all, we cannot really be child-centered if we are not also family-centered. Perhaps most important, I discovered early on that I had to structure parent-teacher conferences in a way that challenged the sense of cringing anticipation that usually pervades those encounters. I did this by beginning the first conference with a simple opening: “You know more about your child than I can ever hope to know; what advice can you give me to make me a better teacher for her?” Turning the power relationship upside down, inviting information and emotion, becoming student to their aspirations,

fears, and experiences, I would usually become a more qualified teacher for their child as well.

The strongest source of knowledge about the student remains the student herself, and tapping into that knowledge is not so difficult. Kids love to tell us about themselves, and we can structure multiple opportunities for them to do so. I have always asked children to draw their families, for example. Young children tend to draw little tadpole creatures, while older youngsters work hard to represent with greater accuracy. But in either case, they reveal a lot: this family includes a dog, a grandmother, and Aunt Helen; this family has grown-up children and in-laws, nieces, and nephews; this family has a large figure who is “mom” and a little tiny “dad” in the corner of the page; this family visits their father in prison.

We might do autobiographical sketches like the “I am Aaron” poem described earlier. The children might draw or write about the worst thing they ever ate, or the scariest moment of their lives, or the sweetest person they ever knew, or their best friends. If we’re reading a story and a character does something courageous or cowardly, generous or small, we will almost certainly take the time to describe when some of us saw someone be generous or cowardly, or when we ourselves were. We might move toward deeper autobiographical writing, family trees, or keeping journals or diaries.

One useful homework assignment I have regularly given to pre-schoolers and college students alike is to have them research their first names: How did you come to have your name? What was the thought behind it? Who gave it to you? Every name has a story, even if only that it sounded nice with the last name. I have pursued names to the Bible and to the Koran, to Russia, China, Brazil, and Puerto Rico, to grandma, great-uncle, and a dead cousin, to Eugene Debs, Malcolm X, and Abraham Lincoln. In one kindergarten class we had a Marcus (from Marcus Garvey), a Solomon (from the Old Testament), and a Lolita (from Lolita Lebron). We also had a Veronica, “because my dad loves Archie comics and always said if he had a girl he’d name her Veronica.” She brought in some comics so we could understand her name better. Names are powerful for individuals, and they sometimes have powerful stories worked up in them as well.

When we discuss culture in class, I have asked students to bring in a “cultural artifact” from home. Again a world of importance opens up: religious symbols, a book, military discharge papers, photographs,

utensils, ornaments, something from the old country, something from long ago. Experiences become validated, and children become more notable and intelligible to themselves and to others (including us); stronger, more able.

I tell students that I'll teach them "interviewing techniques," and then I show them how to use a tape recorder and how to plan an interview. I set them to interviewing each other for practice with questions like: What is the best thing about school? What do you want to do in class that you never get to do? This can lead to wonderful flights of fancy—"I never get to skydive"—or to insights about particular kids, or gaps in my own teaching—"I never get to build with wood here"; "We don't go outside enough."

When teachers value their children's opinions and experiences, children begin to think more openly, and we begin to see them differently. Later we will move to interviewing other children in the school, parents, brothers and sisters, grandparents, neighbors, community residents. We might develop a research project of general interest, and interviewing will take on new importance.

I like developing a treasure hunt with children based on what I know, and on what seems worthwhile for me and others to know. In this treasure hunt, we are searching for people, not things: Find someone whose mom sings in a choir; find someone who has a disabled family member and find out something the family learned from this experience; find someone who has an old person living at home and find out what the best part of that experience is. This kind of activity, too, can affirm the learner, and can make each child more whole, more recognizable and well-defined, more fully present in the classroom.

I have almost always begun the year by asking students to think about their own learning agendas: What do you want to do this year? What do you hope to get out of it? What is kindergarten or eighth grade going to be like? Young children are quick to answer: I'm going to play with my friends; I want to learn to spell; Mom says I'm going to learn to read! These responses help me focus—I must remember the importance of play and friendship, but also the expectation of becoming a more competent speller. Older kids have been in school too long and their answers come more slowly. "What do you want me to do?"—this is the response of the "good" student. Others might say that they just want to survive another year. Seriously pursuing a child's goals in school can, nonetheless, be a helpful guide to teaching.

The point in all of this is to create a range of ways for children to tell us about themselves, to become more whole and more fully alive in the classroom. No single activity will be powerful for everyone; no

single idea will tell the whole of it. But by letting the child's school work become an aid in the teacher's investigation of children, everyone benefits. The school experience can then become stronger and deeper.

A useful approach to child observation was developed at Prospect School in North Bennington, Vermont. Pat Carini and her colleagues created an impressive archive and research center where they have collected the work of hundreds of children over many years. They have documented the school lives of children, and they have also created a compelling method of gathering information and creating rich, detailed portraits of individual children. Because the purpose of the Prospect approach is to develop a thick description of the complex choreography of learning—to really see the whole child as fully as possible in order to sustain and deepen the school experience for that child—there is an effort to make descriptions specific, concrete, and particular, and to avoid generalizations, conclusions, and jargon of any kind. The goal is to build on a child's strengths, abilities, and interests, and to support the teacher's efforts to create a classroom culture and structure that can better nurture and challenge the particular learner. The observation, recording, presentation, and recommendations at Prospect are assumed to be dynamic, changing, and in the service of an ongoing teacher inquiry: Given all the knowledge and information I now have, how shall I teach this student?

The approach at Prospect centers around a "staff review" of a child. This requires a group of teachers working together, optimally in the same school, but sometimes in a support group of teachers from several schools. The staff review contributes to teacher growth and development by creating a formal and regular focus on children. It helps us keep our attention on our shared interest and commitment. We learn a lot about one another when we talk together about children. We build collegiality and support around the central purpose of our professional lives—student learning. Staff review allows teachers to become more critical, more invested, and more intellectually alive to the complexity of teaching. Staff review can be seen as a child-centered approach to staff development.

The staff review requires a teacher to gather together work samples, anecdotal records, observational data, impressions, and artifacts of a student, and to develop an initial "presenting" description. The teacher attempts to describe the child through multiple perspectives,

including: the child's physical presence, stance in the world, gestures, posture, and energy; the child's temperament, disposition, affect, expressiveness, emotional range, and intensity; the child's attachments, commitments, and relationships with other children and adults; the child's interests, and involvement in activities; the child's modes of approach and interest in formal learning; and the child's areas of greatest strength and greatest vulnerability. Wrestling with these areas, attempting to uncover and present something meaningful about each, is a beginning.

Here is how David Carroll and Pat Carini (1989) present a youngster at Prospect:

Sid (a pseudonym) is a tall, long-limbed nine year old with an insistent voice and noticeably awkward movements. When he first entered the Prospect School as an eight year old, his tendency to spread out, oblivious of both body and belongings, frequently irritated his fellow students. He bumped into them, jarred them with loud noises, or disturbed their work. His lack of self awareness put people off. Although he slowly gained a place among the other children, it took considerable mediating on the part of his teacher for him to gain acceptance from the group. Sid's responses were puzzling. His initial reaction to the conflict his behavior provoked was often panic and denial. Efforts to encourage greater self-consciousness and responsibility met with meager success.

Yet, his face would light up with wonder when an idea caught his interest. His full attention was captured by anything mysterious, a problem requiring analysis, or connections to be found among an array of elements. An avid if careless reader, he was full of information, and he liked the attention of adults. A student teacher working in the classroom at the time described Sid's reading: "Sid . . . is often so carried away in the sound and expression of the words that his ability to clarify and comprehend are neglected without someone there to slow him down and mediate between the text and its meaning. But he seems to enjoy as well as benefit from reading aloud . . . letting all that feeling come out while having the opportunity to go back over specific words and action. I think he likes the audience too." (p. 4)

The teacher attempts to focus the staff review on some central issue or problem around which she is seeking support or recommendations. She identifies areas of confusion or uncertainty in teaching this child. In this case, it was noted that:

[Jessica Howard, Sid's teacher] described Sid as ordinarily expressive and lively when talking about ideas and information, but noted that when situations called for a statement of value or feeling, such as settling a

social conflict, Sid's attitude of puzzlement, his flat tone, and his urgency to conclude tended to hinder conversation or stop it altogether. She added her strong impression that Sid found these occasions as frustrating and unsatisfactory as she and his classmates did. . . . She also brought to the group's attention a notable exception to his loss of expression around feeling—one that later proved to increase her understanding of Sid. She reported that in drama Sid is animated and graceful, displaying a real talent for clever improvisation and embellishment. His sense of timing, pace, expression, and imagery are "on the mark" from the first rehearsal, suggesting an ability to grasp easily the tone and overall idea of plot.

She went on to list Sid's preferred activities in the classroom: drawing and storytelling with others, cooking, designing marble chutes and mazes with blocks, making small plasticene figures for dramatic play, and building intricate constructions. . . .

Jessica described Sid's progress in reading, writing, math, social studies, and science. In all areas she emphasized his breadth of understanding and inattention to detail. His writing is fluent, to the point, and expressive of his own opinions, but marred by enormously untidy handwriting.

Jessica illustrated Sid's broad understanding with an example from math. Sid often creates his own processes for solving certain computation problems: In order to add 27 and 8, Sid would say, "Well, add 3 to the 7, that makes 30 . . . so, 35." His approach frequently leaves implicit such steps as the compensation of subtracting 3 from 8 in the example given. These "details" can trip Sid up unless someone recognizes his unconventional procedure and explains to him how his invented approach fits in the number system. Jessica noted Sid's pleasure in these explanations and that he puts them to good use.

In reading, Sid prefers a book such as *The Hobbit* that offers him a whole world to explore and a landscape made for heroic adventure. She confirmed the student teacher's observation that the pace of Sid's mental travel is rapid and his attention mainly focused on the action. Covering the terrain in giant steps, he often overlooks key details because he is so absorbed in the unfolding drama. He is grateful for the adult support in sorting out the story. (pp. 4–5)

Typically, another teacher, designated the chair for this review, summarizes the presentation and offers any available historical perspectives or records. Other teachers who know or who work with the child are then invited to offer specific additional information.

Questions and comments from all participants extend the presentation. If any colleagues have made formal observations of the child, these are presented and discussed. Again the chair summarizes, and now invites recommendations for the consideration of the presenting teacher. Recommendations may start out as broad and open, but will

move over time toward a workable action plan. The review of Sid led to this:

Participants affirmed Jessica's willingness to trace the perimeters of social situations for Sid, and suggested that this approach be used more intentionally and consistently. Even using the vocabulary of "mapping out" in these situations might usefully connect her efforts with Sid's own talents for internal mapping of a large picture or context. The group suggested that mapping itself may indeed be an apt metaphor for one of Sid's most reliable and preferred ways of knowing and learning. Since mapping is a way of forming knowledge across disciplines in timelines, scientific classification, and mathematical patterns, Sid might be encouraged in these directions.

To expand the repertoire of classroom dramatic activities so useful to Sid, the group recommended choral reading, radio plays based on books, and lip synching to popular music. To increase Sid's access to expressed, but bounded, feeling and imagery, the group recommended more deliberate engagement with poetry and music. The group stressed that Sid needs time and occasions to find and make his own connections. A classroom with adults available to mediate his daily social contact with others is already an invaluable support to him.

Most importantly, this Staff Review shifted the focus from Sid's awkward social relations, gaps in language, and mounting frustration to his strengths: skill in large scale thought, pleasure in problem solving pursuits, and intuitive vision. To undergo a formal process which allows a teacher to see a child's strengths much more clearly is a transforming experience.

Jessica's year-end report to Sid and his parents reflects the benefits to both Sid and herself of the insights gained in the Staff Review:

"Sid's term has been predictably full and productive for him. He continues to invest in his projects with energy and enthusiasm. His relationship to the group has stabilized, though Sid still has ups and downs in his capacity to be careful of and more attentive to who and what is around him. . . . There is a general ease in addressing Sid, and an appreciation of his capacity to be helpful in group projects and to generate good ideas. Sid himself is less self-excusing about difficult incidents, though his pattern continues somewhat. He is more articulate and outspoken about how he is feeling, and certainly more aware after the fact of how he contributed to the difficulties. On the whole, Sid has a good, steady, visible place in the group and a variety of associates to choose from for his activities." (pp. 7-8)

The session ends with a critical discussion of the process, and a formal reminder of the importance of safeguarding the privacy of the child and family. Staff review is one way to take seriously teachers'

hard-won, personal knowledge of children, to reflect on it sincerely, and to make it available and public. It provides the opportunity for teachers to think more deeply about the heart of their work. And it works against stereotypes and simple explanations of any type.

Pat Carini (1979) argues that "each person is and remains an ultimate mystery" (p. 4). She has in mind both the complexity of the human experience—the contradictions, oppositions, and dazzling array of patterns and themes that mark each human life—and the ways each life embodies humanity's universal quests. She reminds us that each person mirrors all people, and that each is also a unique and specific expression of life's longing for itself. She draws our attention to the depth and complexity of each life, the dynamic nature of a life being lived—always in construction, forever part of the matrix of a larger humanity.

Carini helps us to recognize that when we observe persons, we are both the seer and the seen, and that seeing ourselves seeing—being aware of the unity embodied in our observations—is critical if we are to avoid blindness and "profane vision," the reduction of the observed into objects for use. "The person can be illuminated," she says, but "finally, the person is never fully disclosed" (p. 8). This is as true for others as for ourselves—there is simply no single dimension that tells all there is to know about any of us. Staying open to mystery, to the recognition that there is always more to know and more to be, is to allow students their full humanity, and to stay alive as a teacher.