

Finding My Lost Voice by Laryza Martell

Although my mother did not finish the third grade, she valued education. Her math recollections include buying penny candy and selling it in the school yard for five cents. She kept lists of the kids who owed her money and she added interest fees when they failed to pay on time. My mother was a shrewd businesswoman, and by the time I was born she owned a shoe store and several taxi cabs. Unfortunately, or fortunately, we left Honduras when she divorced my alcoholic father. In the US we suffered, as most immigrants do, but my mother made sure that we knew that education was the way out. She worked long hours and could not attend parent teacher conferences or join the parent teacher association. Moreover, my mother trusted that my teachers would educate me. I was expected to get good grades and not embarrass my family by misbehaving. Those first few years in the New York school system were shocking and created in me an abyss frequently filled only with self-doubt and fear. But my story has a happy ending.

This summer I attended Prospect Summer Institute I in Bennington, Vermont. The Institute was, personally and professionally, a life changing experience for me. We began our week together with our recollections about entry and play. Each participant was asked to think of a time when we entered a situation and to describe the experience to the group. Additionally, we were asked to think of a play experience. The stories were all different and yet, the thread to our humanity. It seemed that no matter where we grew up, who are parents were, how much money we had, in our descriptions of play, we were full of wondering and adventure. These recollections helped us become intimately acquainted and helped lay the foundation for three days of investigations of the collection of work and teacher narratives of two children who attended Prospect school: Leo and Alva. We focused on the work collected for both children between the ages of 4 and 14 years old. We also participated in descriptions of work brought by participants and we engaged in two descriptive reviews of two different students.

In learning to observe and describe Alva's work, I became, more than ever aware that it was when I became a teacher that I started to find the voice I lost as a child. During one of the sessions this summer at the institute, I commented to my colleagues as we debriefed the session, "I am that student: a second language learner, an immigrant, a poor student. I am the invisible student." Through this experience I was reminded that to empower my students to find their own voices, I must learn to use my life experiences to guide them to find their own voices. But that is not enough. This summer, as we studied Alva's collection of work and the narratives her teachers kept, I asked myself what made Alva's teachers care? What did they do to help Alva? How can I be one of those teachers? By participating in the inquiry process I was able to answer these questions. Moreover, I was inspired to really look at

my student's work. I don't want to miss anything, I want to be very careful and respectful to the children I help educate.

My journey in learning to become a skilled observer has just begun. I first learned at Bank Street College about the Prospect Descriptive Processes in a class that was based on inquiry and utilized the descriptive process. In this class we were asked to work with a student and their family. Throughout the semester we collected formal and informal assessments, art work, photographs, and anecdotes. Based on the data we wrote a descriptive review of the student and made recommendations to his teachers and family. My understandings about children deepened through this experience. That same year I worked at a private preschool and continued to write narratives using a descriptive review stance. Writing narratives helped me to be less judgmental about my student's development, the family's parenting, and my own practice. I grew more respectful of the family's wishes, more tolerant of the student's development, and more driven to improve my teaching skills. I learned to communicate with parents in ways that supported the children's autonomy and growth. I learned to keep more detailed records of each child's interaction with their peers, and their teachers. This attention to detail helped me to analyze their developmental stages and assisted me in organizing an interesting, appropriate and safe environment for children to grow in. I learned to plan strategies for teaching that were creative and effective.

For a short time I worked in a school that was totally opposite what I believed about teaching and learning. I was very unhappy. In this setting teachers and children were invisible. It soon became clear that I needed the right environment to continue to grow in my practice. Fortunately, soon after, I found a home at the Earth School. Since I started my work at the Earth School it has been clear that they are committed to observing and describing children. Cecelia Traugh and Long Island University support the school in their goal to create meaningful assessments through descriptive review and the inquiry process. Cecelia Traugh comes to work with us each month and helps us frame our inquiry sessions. The teachers and administration at the Earth School are committed to looking closely at students' work to determine progress and to create curriculum that is not only intellectually stimulating, but careful in addressing the student's academic, social and emotional needs.

I mentioned at the beginning of this essay that the institute was a life-changing experience for me. I feel that as a child my teachers were very good at planning lessons that taught me how to read and write. However, when my mother and I left Central America and came to New York in 1977, I was enrolled in a public school in Brooklyn where the majority of the student body and staff were ethnically and culturally different than me. I did not think my teachers were mean; I just felt invisible and they were indifferent. They did not seem aware that the other children were torturing me because I was different. The school did not make an effort to help my mother become part of

the school community. In fact, they didn't notice me until I started to miss school for weeks at a time. By then I had learned that I did not matter, that I would probably not succeed, and that I should just give up. It has taken me my whole life to change these beliefs.

Imagine my surprise when I realized, as I poured all my mental energy into observing and describing Alva's work, that deep down in my heart there was a voice that continued to chant these negative thoughts to me. As I looked at Alva's work over and over again, I peeled each layer of judgment back, and I could see more of her personality emerge. My initial interpretations of her work started from my own warped experiences. Yet, as I listened to my colleagues, I began to reject my initial erroneous analysis. I began to see more clearly where Alva needed support. I was amazed that we had only looked at one piece of art work she'd made when she was five! I couldn't wait to read her work, and what her teachers had observed.

I returned to the Earth School this fall invigorated and excited to start my work with the students. I decided to use the same system of anecdotal record keeping that Alva's and Leo's teachers used and this has helped me to keep very detailed records that will help me write thorough narratives of my students. My colleagues at the Earth School continue to help me review my practice. In October we did a descriptive review of video of a child reading and spelling during one of our sessions with Cecelia Traugh. Furthermore, I've continued to attend other descriptive reviews of practice both at my school and neighboring schools. The Earth School continues to be the venue where my lost voice is strengthened, and the descriptive review process is the tool that is helping me to accomplish that.

Laryza Martell is one of three Special Education Teacher Support Service teachers (SETSS) at the EARTH School in the Lower East Side. She has taught in both private and public schools for the past 6 years. She has a Masters Degree from Bank Street College in Early Childhood Special Education, and she is licensed to teach grades k-6 in general education. Currently she teaches kindergarten and third grade at-risk students as well as those who have IEPs. She taught gifted education and several classroom models, including collaborative team teaching in a mixed-age-group setting. She is passionate about special education and looks forward to continuing to learn.