

Reflection on my Prospect Summer Institute 1
Experience

“Seeing Through A Different Lens”

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August 9, 2005

Is there anything that I could say to you that you do not already know? Deep down inside of each one of us lies the truth that only needs to be reawakened from time to time so that we remember what we already know. This is why the wisdom of the greatest people is so simple. That is why we need to listen to children because they speak from that simple place inside of them that is pure truth.

Several times this summer when I attended the Prospect Summer Institute’s Description of Processes I was reminded of how good it is to think like a child. I spent one incredible week with a fabulous group of people that had come together to look at the work of children, teachers and families. We were there to learn how to talk about people. To learn how to describe work with the respect and honor each deserves. The participants came from different educational settings and life experiences. Each person carried a different lens.

Soon after arriving, I decided to call myself a “Prospect Virgin”. I knew that by the end of the week, I would emerge from this experience a different person. After all, I had come in order to be changed. I wanted my thought processes to be pushed, pulled, stretched, molded. I wanted to tinker with different ideas and philosophies. I wanted to have a unique, intimate experience with a group of people that would never be the same.

What I participated in was unique. Each factor was vital in making it so – each person in the group, the way in which everyone learned and participated in the processes, the setting, the weather. These conditions can never be replicated. The thought that it will never again be the same makes me sad but also makes me grateful that I was a part of it.

Many laughs were shared over the term I coined, “Prospect Virgin”. However, when I returned home, and was re-reading Patricia Carini’s article, “Building From Children’s Strengths”, I thought she might approve of my reason behind choosing that term. In her article, she talks about “what the childhood perspective offers and what we would lose were we deprived of it.” Children usually look at life’s experiences through a lens that is clear. As we grow and have life experiences happen that make negative impacts on us, our vision can become clouded. That is how doubt and cynicism can develop. Children generally assume everything will be good because they are trusting in the adults who care for them and in the safety of the experience of life.

I chose to approach the Prospect Summer Institute with the attitude that I was a child about to embark on a wonderful adventure with old and new friends. I had no idea how much work it would be but I knew that I would make sure I got the chance to play and have fun while I was there. A friend I trusted, Louisa Cruz-Acosta, told me she went every year and loved it. That was enough for me to decide that I wanted and needed to attend.

Before coming to Prospect, Louisa advised me to bring work from the students of my classroom to share with others. Sharing the work of one of my students was a wonderful experience. Aside from the feeling of sheer joy that I experienced when I showed off what my students can do, I received a lot of substantial experience in describing work. At first, I thought it might be really difficult to do a presentation because I was so close to the work. Right before the actual session, I felt the desire to run away from it all. Ideas popped into my head – ‘Don’t go to the session, stay in your room, sit in a lounge chair in the field and fall asleep, hide out in the college’s library’. Any of these might have worked temporarily but I am not the kind of person to run away from a responsibility. I knew that there was a group of people counting on me so I needed to show up.

Then I was wondering, why did these people choose to come to **my** description of work? I was honored knowing that I would have a captive audience for a few hours who would look my student’s work and observe and reflect with me on it. By that time, I had already shared the work with teachers at school. I had shown the work to my institute’s facilitator (Taeko) and then I had shared it some more with the people who would be co-chairing my session. I was sick and tired of talking about this particular student, reflecting on his work, telling the same stories over and over. ‘Couldn’t I just drop off the work and attend another session?’

Finally, I went through the process. We spent some quiet time observing and taking notes. Some of us stood up to get a better look at the details. Some of us needed to touch the work, look at it from one side, then the other. In a

go-round, we shared our observations. Then we did another go-around. And another. I used to think that there would only be a limited amount one could say about a work. But I was wrong. Each person has an infinite amount they can say about something. If a person is challenged to continue to share their perspective, they will.

The implications for my teaching are enormous! I can take a piece of work – any work – and apply these processes with my class. We could take an art piece or a writing piece and look at it again and again and again and again and again and again until I think we have exhausted all the ideas. Then we could extend it in a way that is not immediately recognizable.

On the ride back home to NYC, one of the co-chairs of my sessions, Barbara, asked me if I would like her to chair my descriptive review of a child at the November conference. I am very nervous about the process. However, I am always up for a challenge that will help me develop myself personally and professionally.

Looking closely at the work of children is a remarkable activity. You have to remember to look at the work with the same lens a child would use. Suspend your judgment. Resist the need to label and classify. The heart of a child is pure and unassuming. When we look at work without all the shackles of expectations, standards and benchmarks, we free ourselves to see beyond the work to the person within it. It is a beautiful exercise.