

"New Life For An Old Piece of Paper"
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Cooperative

Almost 40 years ago a teacher at the Prospect School sat down with Pat Carini to think about what she had been doing with her class of four- to seven-year-olds ("Group 1" that year at the school). The notes from that Curriculum Interview (printed here, borrowed from the Archive, now housed at the University of Vermont) have gained a new life in the past year. [Note: to learn more about the Archive, click on "Archives" on our home page. To learn more about the Prospect School in the 70s, click on "History."]

In November 2004 a group met at the Fall Conference to reread these notes and other Archive documents from the 1970s. That Saturday afternoon review provided a fertile occasion for current teachers to think about their classrooms. One of the participants, Gill Maimon from Powel School in Philadelphia, urged her colleagues to arrange a local conference with more time for us to look at the documents. We raised funds to bring Pat Carini to meet with us for three days in May (2005) and to visit some of our classrooms.

Including Pat, six of us each visited Philadelphia public school classrooms to observe ways curriculum involves the students. The seven classrooms visited were: Amy Silverman's kindergarten at McKinley (North Philadelphia), Gillian Maimon's first grade at Powel (West Philadelphia), Sandy Soley's first grade at Ferguson (North Philadelphia), Christopher Powers' third grade at

Frederick Douglass (North Philadelphia), Lisa Hantman's third grade at McCall (Chinatown/Society Hill), and Anne Burns-Thomas's eighth grade at Masterman (Center City). Each observer provided full oral and written feedback to the teacher she observed. Pat Carini incorporated the observations into reflections offered to the whole conference group. The feedback was enriching and energizing for the teachers who were observed. Each of the seven teachers reported heightened understanding and renewed enthusiasm for the difficult work they have been engaged in. The observers reported on classrooms pervaded with calm, productivity, order, even joy. We concluded that even within the strictly bounded curriculums required currently in Philadelphia and in the nation governed by No Child Left Behind, there IS room for variety, for choice. There is richness, and it is observable.

Our work together in Day One of the conference also gave us hope that meaningful curriculum can still happen in Philadelphia-area schools. Twenty classroom teachers each told a story of a time that curriculum took on a life of its own. We listened to each other tell about a wide variety of classroom experiences: mandated writing assignments that became meaningful in the real world (children's persuasive letters that caused real change and gave students an authentic sense of the power of the pen); a student-initiated Casino game that became an occasion for studying complex math and economics; an insect study that spun off into rap performance and an enduring frieze; poetry from a supposedly "below level" third grader that her classmates clamored to hear over and over; a museum of problems

solved by the group; projects that opened into the world (neighborhood walks; community crusades) and projects that brought the world in (with classroom entry points for the students' and teacher's families -- and even pets). We looked together at themes we heard across the stories: a picture of education as bigger than a building, bigger than the mandates. We noticed how children took hold of the curriculum and made it even bigger, so it spiraled out, involving ever more children. Pat Carini noted that it often started with a teacher giving her attention to a particular child, as when Marta noticed that the "bad boy" in her Head Start class was a builder. When Marta went on to provide plenty of time, space and materials for his building projects, the class changed and the public perception of the "bad boy" changed. He became the competent kid. Building became something for everybody. "These stories told about something exciting, something those children won't forget...No Curriculum Web inventor could possibly come up with those things; children take things to different places than any adult would come up with."

Day Two brought us to the documents from the 1970s at the Prospect School. Our purpose was not to find "models" for our current classrooms, but rather, to keep accessible other ways to think about curriculum than those we are experiencing under the mandates of No Child Left Behind. We wanted to immerse ourselves in a different time in American society, an era when society and government were more widely seen as existing for the public good, when education was viewed as something larger than vocational training for economic productivity and private gain.

We convened on Day Two to read the December 1976 interview with Tara (reproduced here). In "round-robin" fashion, we took turns reading aloud sections of the interview, commenting briefly after we read our bit. We read about themes that had emerged that fall from the interests and interactions of that particular group of children. We read about possible extensions and plans for the future. Our conference planners had hoped that this interview would prompt thoughts about our current practice. They did.

Here are some of our responses:

"The time frame was a broad one, September through December. That allowed some themes to overlap. Tara needed to know when to stick with a theme and when move on."

"I wonder how Tara led those discussions she refers to."

"I could use that idea of non-cook cooking."

"Each material Tara set up had its own learning possibilities. I've noticed that about the stuff I bring in for the kids."

"It was great to have a place to leave things set up over time, so it all didn't have to get cleaned up right after it happened."

"Teaching requires tinkering, a sense of where things could go. That's different from what happens for curriculum developers who sit in a separate room and make the connections, apart from the work with the children. But in some ways it's not so different -- you need to dream up what could come next."

"To maintain her own sanity, the teacher has to get a balance between self-sustaining activities and activities that required her direct attention."

"It's liberating for me to think that exploring materials in depth is itself a curriculum."

"It's great to have the chance to make a mess – important, and fun!"

"Wow! 'Tinkering!' That's a profoundly different image of teaching, more like jazz, creating spaces in which improvisation happens."

"I'm pulled back and forth -- between the value system I'm supposed to be working in now, and the value system back then in that Prospect class. I find myself being a police officer saying, 'Don't make a mess!' But I'm also saying, 'Let go a little! Make a mess. Do this stuff! But don't get it on the floor.'"

"How well Tara knew her kids! She could take the time to watch them. I don't get to see a lot of what's happening in the block corner, in the dramatic play area. I'm often sitting in a corner reading with three kids, guided reading. When I do get to be on the side, just watching it all happen, I learn so much about the kids, about myself, about the space. I get to focus on one kid and I get to see the larger group, going in and out with the materials, with the children."

"It's good to be able to say 'Change of plan!' instead of being stuck in a preset curriculum – the way Tara could decide not to use the stove."

"I wonder how these interviews were conducted at Prospect back then. I'd like to know the teacher's exact words as she talked about her work. I teach 13- and 14-year olds. These kinds of things aren't a part of their life at school. I did give them three options for a project. It was interesting that 25 of the 33 students focused on romance. I know that when there's choice like this, it gives me places to know more and know better. With my age group it's less about the hands-on activities

and more about emotional development, thought development."

"How much Tara has to know to make the experiences meaningful! She knows about magnets. She knows about color change. How do we train teachers to do this? Today we tend to give teachers a script and don't trust them."

"It's great when older elementary students have a chance to work with materials, too. This year I've been lucky to have the chance to watch fifth- and sixth-graders sew outfits, do crazy architecture."

Day Three of the Philadelphia conference was a Saturday so we had a full day to study the 1970s documents (such as, selected children's writings, descriptive reviews of individual children as learners, attempts by teachers to chart the class's interests in curriculum webs and other graphics; transcripts of class discussions before a field trip or during science study). We worked in smaller groups (4-5 teachers together) to explore some of the materials, to raise issues about our current teaching situations, and to pose larger questions. We returned to the whole group to share our thinking. Some of the questions that arose were: What kinds of projects are self-sustaining (requiring less and less teacher input as time goes on)? What kinds of professional development make teachers more open to effective open-ended teaching? How can we make curriculum planning more open, in our current situations? How can we get to the Big Ideas underlying our current curriculum? How can we document the academic learning that results from letting children work with a rich variety of materials? Who's educating whom, for what? Is education for control, for a work force, or for the benefit

of humankind, for the opening up of possibility? How can we find time to bring teachers together in collegial projects, such as the vital project of supporting the newer teachers among us? How can we honor the local contexts of our different school communities, so that a student feels “I come from somewhere. I’m valued. I’m carrying something forward.”

We felt hopeful as our Saturday work drew to a close: Being with children, you see the human resource all the time. There are so many capable children (vs. the lie that “They can’t do this, they can’t do that.”) We committed ourselves to challenging that which closes down, that which destroys trust and tradition. A teacher who used to teach at the Prospect School was with us for the Saturday session. We asked her how her experience in the ‘70s influenced what she does now, in a public school that operates under the current mandates. She said, “It’s inside. I think about it all the time. It’s in the way I look at the kids. I know they have an inner life.”

We expect that the three days in May are having a lasting impact on keeping alive a large view of education in our Philadelphia area. The 38 teachers involved in the conference have gained a lot “inside... [to] think about all the time.” The weekly Thursday meetings of the Philadelphia Teachers Learning Cooperative have a new source of energy, a strengthened vision of possibility.