

Back in The Saddle
by Nancy King Mildrum

Last spring I attended a Friday lecture and a Saturday morning workshop on the campus of the University of Vermont, which honored the acquisition of the Prospect School Archives to The Special Collections Department at the Bailey Howe Library at UVM. I learned about this event when I received a flyer from The National Writing Project in Vermont. I was tempted to learn more when I saw the phrase THE BIGNESS OF EDUCATION in large bold letters within the text of the flyer. It's so big, what we do. I had never heard of Pat Carini but I suspected her message could be an antidote to our cultural habit of undervaluing and simplifying education based on conditions generated by politics, popularity and power.

During the Friday lecture I was taken by Pat's grace and choice of language. On Saturday morning her address was also beautifully delivered and the subsequent workshop I attended affirmed what I have learned through 25 years of teaching in Vermont public schools. It's all about the individual.

That morning in my group of approximately ten people we systematically looked at a series of drawings by one student over the span of about seven years. We thoughtfully pointed out individual details in the work; placement of objects, use of line and pattern, and the repetition of motifs over the years. Through our non-judgmental observations a profile emerged, compelling evidence of the individuality of the maker. Preset standards composed by institutional thinking pale in comparison to this method of close observation.

In the weeks following the Prospect Archives workshop I began experimenting with a more individualized instructional model. In writing and chess classes, which I teach in grades seven and eight, I intentionally stripped group lessons down to the bare minimum and experimented with providing content and skills on a student-by-student basis. I depended on students in close proximity to listen in, either surreptitiously or as part of the dialog. I also noticed that I was typically respectful of the developmental stage of each child, yet I had more confidence in letting go of expectations that felt off base for individual children and trust his or her learning process and timing.

Listening to Pat Carini and participating in the descriptive review process helped me realize that my confidence as a child centered teacher had been slightly eroded by the current emphasis on standards, repackaged testing and bar graph profiles of children. My fascination with teaching as the art of finding and supporting the uniqueness of each child is what's fueled my dedication to public schools for so many years, so I am grateful to those who provided the Prospect Archives event because it strengthened my common-sense courage to keep individual children at the center of education.

Nancy King Mildrum is an enrichment teacher in Georgia Elementary and Middle School, in Georgia, Vermont. Georgia is about 25 miles north of Burlington, Vermont where the Prospect Archives are stored at UVM. Nancy works with students in grades 4 to grade 8 in a variety of classes. She develops and delivers opportunities for her students which are divergent in nature and rely on student creative productivity. Classes include: independent study, chess, drama, lots of writing and many others.