

INTRODUCTION

A PAGE FROM THE PROSPECT ALBUM

Patricia F. Carini

Walking or driving up West Street from the center of the village of North Bennington, Vermont, you arrive at Prospect School, located in two buildings on the edge of the village. The Main Building, once a guest lodge for the Park-McCullough House across the street, is home for the younger children, ages 4½ to 11 (see Figure I.1). The middle school-age children (11–14) are located in the nearby Bleau House. There is a teacher for each group, with parent volunteers, and sometimes a teacher intern working alongside. The setting is distinctly rural, yet the school serves children from all across the community, including the downtown Bennington industrial areas. The total population is small in number, never more than 100 children, and more typically around 65 or 70. In the lower school, these groups usually include 23 to 26 children; in the middle school, the number is mostly under 20. It's the early 1980s, when Prospect is about 18 years in the making.

Walking into the school, you may feel as many visitors have as if you are entering a home. The rooms are small and adjoining; there are no hallways, but since each room opens off another, and short flights of stairs accommodate additions made to the original dwelling (circa 1840's), there are nooks and crannies aplenty. You discover, on a meandering walk through the building, a child-sized kitchen, many block areas, and the "big room," once a game trophy room and the only space large enough to conduct movement classes or to accommodate all the staff and children at one time.

The building is old and scuffed, in need of paint and other repairs. This isn't a rich school. Yet everywhere you see children in small multiage groups or alone, engaged with paint, blocks, cardboard and paper, sewing materi-

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FIGURE I.1. Photograph of Prospect School

als, cooking supplies, woodworking materials, books of all sorts, maps, globes, timelines, a wide variety of mathematical equipment, and natural science supplies and tools.

Later in the morning, you listen in on one of the whole-class discussions or lessons, joining the children seated in a circle on the floor. The point of departure for one of these discussions may be a child's or group of children's project. In another, it may be a theme that emerged from interests current in the group, such as animals or mechanics or pioneer life or nature study. In yet another, it may be the teacher's choice of a topic or idea, such as geometric forms or a history timeline. Perhaps you spend some time after the class meeting, and before lunch, watching a group of children researching and designing plans for a large-scale construction or you decide to observe a teacher working individually with a child on reading or writing or math.

After watching the children so deeply and actively involved with making things, you would certainly want to spend a considerable amount of time looking at the collections of children's works housed in the Prospect Archives. By the 1980s, there are upwards of 250,000 works arranged by child, often spanning as much as nine years of a child's school life, and including artworks across a spectrum of media, writings of all kinds, and constructions (e.g., see Figure I.2).



FIGURE I.2. Photograph of Block Construction

In terms of the archives, it happens you have arrived at a propitious moment. Through funding from the Bush and Jessie Smith Noyes Foundations, Prospect in concert with the Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of North Dakota is embarked on publishing a *Reference Edition of the Prospect Archives* (Prospect Center, 1985). Thirteen scholars, some from education, others from art, anthropology, history, and literature, are at this moment cataloguing collections and selecting works for the slide selections that will compose part of the publication.

You might decide to join one of the scholars' seminar sessions, listening in on an overview of one of the collections presented by the scholar responsible for cataloguing it. Perhaps you decide to stay and participate in a descriptive review of a child's story or painting selected by the scholar as a focus for this session.

Later, you go upstairs to the adult library to meet the students enrolled in Prospect's Teacher Education Program and to sit in on a class. This day it is a session on observing in which students and teacher are recollecting their own favored play as children and what they learned from that play. Starting from their own experience, the students and teacher are launching a series of observations of children at play. Staying on in the library after class, you have the opportunity to meet with the teacher and the student teachers to talk about your observations in the school earlier in the day and to ask questions.

On the second day of your visit, after another extended period of observation in the school, you return to the adult library to read some of the Prospect publications and to talk with me or some other staff member about the program for longitudinal, school-based inquiry. From among the publications, I might hand you three monographs: *Observation and Description: An Alternative Methodology for the Investigation of Human Phenomena* (Carini, 1975); *The Art of Seeing and the Visibility of the Person* (Carini, 1979); and *The School Lives of Seven Children* (Carini, 1982)—all published under the sponsorship of the North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation.

As you and I sit down to talk about these monographs, I call your attention to ideas key at Prospect and for me when I wrote them. The importance of the child's or any person's uniqueness, complexity, and integrity. The role of description in representing these. The attentiveness to the manner in which, for any person, dynamic polarities, seemingly contradictory, enact that person's expressiveness and complexity. The assumption of human capacity, widely distributed, as the taproot value nurturing all these ideas.

To illustrate what I mean, I might read you a paragraph from an early unpublished descriptive study of a child from age 5 to age 13, one which predates the first of the monographs by several years:

The person who emerges from these descriptive statements is unique and complex—and in his uniqueness and complexity, he reflects the uniqueness and complexity of all persons. If he [can be] explosive and angry, he is also persistent and concentrated. If he is physical and energetic, he is also expressive. If material goods compel him, he is also drawn to music and the arts. If he plays to win and must win, he can also be generous and helpful. *And he is all of these things at one time, an integrity that escapes any attempt to "type" him or to classify his particular behaviors. . . .* [What we] are seeking [in this kind of inquiry are] the patterns of continuity and the patterns of transformation in . . . the multiple expressions of an individual life that are the statement of that [person's] unique expressiveness.

From those early beginnings, I would call your attention to the most recent of the monographs, *The School Lives of Seven Children* (Carini, 1982), since it reports on a full-scale application of this longitudinal, descriptive methodology. I would explain that it is based on a five-year inquiry Prospect designed and conducted as a component of an evaluation of New York State's Experimental Prekindergarten Program, in which we followed the school lives of children from seven different districts across the state from ages 4 to 9.

With your visit drawing to a close, I would also call your attention to documentations published in-house of Prospect School and of Prospect's adult education programs, including the summer institutes. Along with these, I would certainly also supply you with flyers for Prospect's upcoming conferences, workshops, and institutes. With your interest piqued by your visit, it is possible you would decide later on to enroll for the coming summer's institute.

Assuming you did make that choice, you would arrive on a late July day in any of the summers from 1980 to 1984 to find yourself in the company of teachers from Philadelphia, New York City, Ithaca (New York), Grand Forks (North Dakota), and the Greater Boston area. Just as they have, you have brought with you your own works-in-progress. Among these you might include observations of children and descriptive records, collections of children's works, a teaching journal, class newsletters and other writings, and materials for a Descriptive Review of Teaching Practice.

During the next two weeks, you are going to be part of collaborative inquiry groups focused on description of these kinds of materials and on learning and reworking processes for that description. At other times you may choose to join in on a teacher's Descriptive Review of her Practice or one of several Descriptive Reviews of Children or their Works or Issues. Topics in the early 1980s included, among others, children's responses to the threat of nuclear war, the value of diversity in the classroom, tests and the history of testing, increasing class size, and bilingual education.

Each morning of the institute, you participate along with everyone else in a seminar on the institute theme, which, depending on the summer, is The Growth of Language or Values/Valuing or Science. Perusing documentations of summer institutes for those years, I discover that readings for the seminars included, among others, Alfred North Whitehead's (1938) *Modes of Thought*, Raymond Williams's (1976) *Keywords*, Howard Nemerov's (1978) *Figures of Thought*, Clara Park's (1972) *The Siege*, and Evelyn Fox Keller's (1983) biography of the renowned geneticist Barbara McClintock, *A Feeling for the Organism*.

This is Prospect at a moment in time: A school for children. An archive of children's works. A center for descriptive inquiry. Adult education pro-

grams, including conferences, workshops, and summer institutes for experienced professionals.

The other story of Prospect is of an institution without an adequate financial base. Operating without public funds except for the federal monies that subsidized the early years, and continuing to serve many families for whom an independent school tuition was not affordable after that funding ended, Prospect eked out its existence from year to year. The sources were several: gifts from local benefactors, most consistently and generously, Jane and Lucien Hanks and Babs and Bill Scott; contributions from the membership; what was earned through workshops, institutes, and other adult education programs; and consulting fees and grants. In particular, Prospect was the grateful recipient of grants spanning a number of years from the Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and the Bush Foundation for the publication of the *Reference Edition of the Prospect Archives* (Prospect Center, 1985).

In June, 1991, the always weak financial base gave way. With deep regret and sorrow, the school was forced to close—26 years after it was founded. It has remained closed since that time.

In November 1991, Prospect reorganized under a newly formed working board with a national membership. The board retained Prospect's name, "Prospect Archives and Center for Education and Research," with the aim of continuing many of its functions and adding others. Much has been accomplished, and many resources and activities now define Prospect in 1999.

There are the collections of children's works and *The Reference Edition of the Prospect Archives* (Prospect Center, 1985). This edition—which documents 36 children, each over at least five years, in slides, microfiche, and text—is available from the Prospect Center and in use for teaching and research purposes.

Teachers, parents, administrators, teacher educators, and researchers participate each year in Prospect's annual institutes and conference. One- and two-week summer institutes, which are focused on observation and descriptive processes and inquiry, are offered every year in Bennington (Vermont), Philadelphia, and New York City. Since 1991, the Fall Conference is held annually near New York City and serves as a weekend introduction to Prospect ideas and processes.

Members of Prospect's working board, and others in the membership, have also brought these ideas and processes to a variety of schools, teacher centers, and universities. Often these consultations set in motion a descriptive inquiry group within a teacher center or school, or initiate descriptive studies of children's or adult students' works, or help teachers and parents learn a particular process such as the Descriptive Review of the Child. A major research effort in the 1990s involved the teachers' participating in Summer

Institute II serving as consultants for a National Science Foundation Science Project, directed by Edward Chittenden for the Educational Testing Service, Princeton, New Jersey.

Another aspect of Prospect's work is its publications (see Appendix). *The Prospect Review*, started in 1993 and published twice yearly, presents Prospect-related writing from across the membership. *Prospect Papers* are issued occasionally, typically featuring talks presented in one or another of Prospect's annual events. With this book on the Descriptive Review of the Child and its companion volume, *Schools in the Making, A Collection of Talks, 1988-1998* (Carini, in press), we are publishing some portion of the accrued work of the past thirty years. This book engages the reader in the actual doing of descriptive reviews, while *Schools in the Making* invites the reader to consider the wider context of the values and ideas foundational to these processes and relates both to current educational, social, and political issues. At a time when education is threatened by pushes on all sides for conformism and standardization, we believe this is the *right* time to get the Prospect ideas and descriptive processes out to classroom teachers, parents, administrators, teacher educators, and the research community.