



Center for Leadership & Educational Equity

A Letter to Parents and Teachers on Some Ways of Looking at and Reflecting on Children: An Addendum to the Descriptive Review of a Child

Originally drafted by Patricia Carini, Fall, 1993.

Dear Parents and Teachers,

I have chosen a letter as the way to talk with you about looking at children and reflecting on what you have noticed for the reason that letters can be personal in tone and rather informal. And that fits with what I want to say about observing — an attitude or way of looking that I prefer to think of as “attending to children with care”. Parents and teachers are interested in children. They are with children a lot. Through that continuous immersion, parents and teachers possess thick layers of working knowledge about children. Teachers and parents care for children and they also care about children. Parents and teachers share the responsibility for educating children. And yet often teachers’ and parents’ knowledge of children is neither recognized nor valued.

This letter describes an exercise that is meant to do just that: to value and recognize your interest, caring and knowledge and to build upon it for the benefit of children. The exercise I propose asks teachers and parents, or others with children close to them, to form a habit of regularly re-viewing them — that is, calling them to mind; picturing them in particular settings or locations; remembering them in a variety of postures and moods; listening with an inner ear to their voices. The purpose of this re-viewing is the deepened recognition of children. It is meant to give you, the important grown-ups in a child’s life, a way to recognize fully how much you already know and understand. It is meant, too, to expand those understandings and to create a context of memory, ever growing and deepening, that will inform your own responses to children as individuals.

If your experience with this exercise turns out to be something like my own, you will also find as you visualize a child in your mind’s eye -- or listen to the child’s remembered voice and words -- that there are blurs and gaps in the picture. Some of these will make you wonder, reconsider, and take a closer look. In this way, for me, recollecting leads to more attentive looking and listening. It is also important, though, to keep in mind that the purpose of attending isn’t to scrutinize a child or even to “figure them out,” and certainly not to change them into someone else. The purpose is simpler and more ordinary: to be more sensitively attuned to who they are and are becoming so that, recognizing them as persons, we can better assist and support their learning.

To do this exercise, cast your inner eye on a particular child. If you want to review several children, perhaps all the children in your family, or a group of children in a classroom, it usually works best to do this one at a time. At least in my experience, if I try to do several at once, they blur or one child takes center stage, and calls the tune for the others. Then, instead of seeing each child as who that child is, I find myself comparing them according to what stood out to me about that first child who caught my attention. What does work is to develop the picture of one child, allow an interval of time, and then move on to others. The first few children will take quite a lot of concentration; as you form the habit of attending carefully, you will find yourself noticing more and remembering

more. As your memory strengthens, you will grow more attuned to subtler and broader aspects of the children's expressiveness. As you notice more and attend to what you notice more consciously the picture of a child will form with greater ease and your capacity to keep a number of children in mind at the same time without blending them will increase.

As you are recollecting a child, also form the habit of making notes to yourself of what you are remembering. The notes are raw material that you can go back to later to review in preparation for a parent-teacher conference or in order to present (or write) a portrayal of the child. Other raw materials you might keep along with this folder or journal of notes are photographs, drawings, or other things the child makes and even, if you wish, audio or visual tapes.

Another help in recollecting a child is to think of the child in a variety of settings and locations. Every parent knows how surroundings and time of day influence a child; so do fatigue or illness. Teachers are often aware that a child who is free and open outdoors on the playground may look less so in the confines of the classroom or even seem subdued or withdrawn. Also children (and adults) have favorite places to be and other strong preferences. For example, feelings about how quickly or slowly they want to start or end the day or an activity; how many people they want around and how much time they need to be alone; how long they can sit in one place and concentrate on the same thing and how much variety and change they can comfortably tolerate, etc.

The following paragraphs use the headings of the descriptive review of the child as a sort of organizing device for recollecting. Use them as they seem helpful, but please don't be bound by them. They are meant to prime the pump of memory but not to be confining or predetermining.

Thinking of a child's **physical presence and gesture**, be attentive to what stands out to you immediately. Then, take note of the size and build but also of style of dress, color preference, prize possessions, etc. Visualize how the child moves, with attention to pace, characteristic rhythm and gestures, and how these may vary. For example, you might think about how the child tends to enter the classroom or the child's pace at home first thing in the morning or at the end of the day. You might think, too, of how much space a child occupies, where the child tends to position themselves in a group, etc.

Locate the child in motion, physically engaged, both outdoors and indoors. For example, you might think of what the child likes to do outdoors (such as bike riding, exploring, sports, etc.) and notice to yourself the energy, pace and gestures involved. Do the same for active indoor play such as dress-ups, block building and other construction, etc. Then think where the child seems most at ease and how you can tell that is so; then take it other side round and think where the child seems least comfortable or most constrained.

Other slants you might take on the child's presence include the voice: its inflection, volume and rhythm; characteristic phrases and ways of speaking; the expressiveness of the eyes, hands and mouth; where the child's feelings can be read (and how easily); where and when energy flows most easily and smoothly; where energy seems to be concentrated; how tension shows itself, etc.

Attending to expression makes a natural bridge to the child's **disposition and temperament**. You might start by reflecting on how the child usually greets the world. Or to say that a little differently, you might think of how you would describe the child's most typical attitudes toward life.

With these characteristic feeling tones at the center, picture to yourself the sort of emotional terrain the child covers in the course of a day and also according to a variety of circumstances: some children (and people) tend to maintain an even, steady emotional balance; others are quick to laughter and quick to tears; still others are likely to be turned inward and unlikely to display their feelings, etc.

Think, too, about what the child cares for deeply and what stirs deep feeling. Similarly, reflect on what goes against the child's honor or sense of rightness or justice and where the child has deep loyalties and strong personal commitments. Reflect, too, on how these deep feelings tend to be expressed.

Connections with other people are not easily separable from disposition and temperament. First, gather in your mind some examples of the child in the company of other children. In the classroom or at home, think about the location of the child in relation to the larger community of children. That is, reflect on where you usually see them; how they go about making a place for themselves; how they tend to move into a new group or to respond to unfamiliar children.

Picture to yourself the range of the child's relationships with other children: think about any children with whom the child has formed a close, enduring relationship but also think of how the child falls in with more loosely connected groups that may form around games or other classroom or neighborhood activities. Reflect on what the child's role is within friendships and small groups; with brothers and/or sisters or close relatives; within larger groups.

Give some attention to how the child responds if difficulties arise in a group or with a friend or if they, or another child, is in distress or left out, etc. Also think about when the child prefers to be alone or left to their own devices.

Now, you might shift your attention to the child in relation to you or other adults. Think first of the child's characteristic responses and ways of connecting with adults and also the range of these responses. Picture, for example, how the child greets familiar adults and the kind of contact the child establishes in the course of the day. For example, if there are adults who are sought out, reflect on what draws the child to them; if there are others who are ignored or avoided, think about what keeps the child at a distance.

Think, too, about the child's preferred ways of being with you or with other adults and what the child expects back from you. Another point of reflection might be the way the child negotiates the transition from one adult to another. Yet another might be your sense of what makes the child feel safe, trusted, respected and secure with adults (or not).

Now give some attention to how you and other adults tend to welcome the child and generally respond to them. Think about how easily you or other adults recognize and value the child and how you (or others) express that to them. If the child is hard to see, give some thought to what keeps the child hidden from you (or others). Reflect, too, on what adult responses, interests, and ways of being hold the child's interest and win their respect, and alternately, which kinds of responses or attitudes are likely to put the child off or lead to anger or conflict.

Children, like adults, tend to have **strong interests and preferences** that are absorbing and long lasting. From my experience, these are likely to offer much valuable insight in terms of the child's entries into learning and particular talents to be nurtured. I like to start by making a list of all the things I know a child really likes such as particular foods (or eating in general!), colors, people, animals, places (indoors or outdoors), and a parallel list of what I know the child dislikes or finds repellent. Quite often when I look at these lists, patterns emerge of which I wasn't previously aware. Think, too, about the ways the child expresses these likes and dislikes and how likely they are to change or to be sustained.

A next step is to make a list of any question, wonderings or curiosities that have stirred the child's mind and imagination, giving special attention to those that persist or are recurrent. Here, too, it is interesting to look for patterns among these -- for example, connections and contrasts — and also for the range. Reflect, too, on how these questions and interests are expressed: for example, in play, in choices of books or films, in conversation, in drawing or construction, etc.

Closely related to this, picture the media and the play that most capture their attention. I find it helpful to start by recalling what the child is likely to do if they have a choice and plenty of time: for example, listening to stories; reading and books; building with blocks; making “small worlds”; drawing; writing; painting; junk construction; sand or water; video games; the natural world; games and sports; making large scale forts or houses, etc. Here, too, lists are often useful and again usually yield patterns and give a good sense of the range of play and media in which the child finds satisfaction. I often start this listing with favorite stories and books, television programs and movies, and turn next to play, games and activities that are absorbing.

Other interesting points of reflection are the kinds of “props” that are part of the child’s preferred play and activities (dress up clothes, boxes, miniature figures, balls, wheeled vehicles, etc.); the ways that play or activities may be linked to particular seasons or time of day; or the role the child tends to assume keeping group play and activities going and developing. Sometimes, too, there are particular figures or especially interesting topics or themes featured in the play a child prefers; for example, super heroes or knights or battles or space or dinosaurs or Ninja turtles or olden times or disasters or fairy tales or... (this list is virtually endless in its possibilities).

Think, too, about what seems to you to be really satisfying and fulfilling about these kinds of play, interests, and activities. And reflect, too, on the standards the child observes around this play: for example, what makes it “right”; what spoils it; what “rules” or customs do other children have to observe in order to be part of the play, etc.

In my experience, the child’s preferences, interests and choices are windows to **the child as a thinker and learner**. Through these windows it is possible to glimpse how a child goes about making sense of the world and their own experience. Or, to say that a little differently, from noticing those world themes that fascinate a child it is possible to intuit fields of study that will have a strong appeal. In a parallel way, attention to play as a sort of thinking space of the child’s own making yields insights about the child as a maker of knowledge.

A good place to start is to think of things, ideas or media for which a child has an inner sense or “feel”; for example, machines or music or language or people or throwing a ball or animals or drama or number or color or paint or the piano or building or ...(again the list is virtually endless). Another way to approach this is to reflect on what the child has always done or does with great ease.

Think, too, about how (through what situations and experiences) this “feel” or inner sense is observable to you and others. Give some thought to whether the child recognizes these talents. This is important to consider since often people take their greatest strengths as givens and although they rely on them are not aware of them. I don’t personally think that it is always a good idea to point these strengths out to another person, since for some that could be inhibiting or embarrassing. I do think, though, that having a sense of where children stand in relation to their own abilities is useful to a parent or teacher. Then, it is a matter of judgment based on your other knowledge of the child and the nature of your relationship with them to make the decision on what will best support and assist the child’s development of these strengths.

Looking in another direction, think to yourself how the child gains a firm understanding or internalizes knowledge or is inclined to figure things out. For example, there may be an inclination to map or sketch or draw or construct or graph. Or, equally, a child may rely a lot on a strong capacity of observing and remembering. Or perhaps the child gets to know something by talking it through or by dramatizing and enacting it. There may be interest in taking things apart and putting them back together; or looking at things or ideas from many angles; or counting, ordering and creating patterns; or discovering what makes something happen by trying different combinations; or looking things up in books; or studying pictures or photographs... (again, the possible list is virtually endless).

Since we all have many ways of figuring things out, spend some time reflecting on when the child is likely to prefer a particular approach and when that may be discarded in favor of another. I have noticed, too, that usually there are observable connections among the range of approaches. For example, a five-year-old child of my acquaintance much interested in nature and natural objects was a close observer and an astute connector of events (“Grown ups...mow down the dandelions because they grow bumblebees. I know. I saw them together and they were both yellow.”). While the conclusion is faulty, the logic is sturdy. They were also an able tree climber, using the trees as an observation point that gave them new and different perspectives on the world.

Sometimes, and especially from children’s questions and wonderings, it is possible to glimpse what I think of as a sort of bent or inclination. Some children incline toward imaginative, poetic comparisons with an eye to surprising likenesses between objects or events that on the surface are quite different. To offer one example, I once overheard a child of about three say softly to himself “rain” as they observed their mother’s long dark hair fall back, catching the light and shimmering as it flowed. Both the comparison and the image that captured it were apt. Or there may be a philosophical, reflective and speculative talent, or the child may have a religious or spiritual bent. There may be an attraction to the big picture and big ideas or the child may be adept at seeing the outline or structure that holds things or ideas together or there may be an attraction to textures and small detail. There may be an experimental or problem solving slant on the world and an interest in casual relationships.

However, it’s important to keep in mind that in life children draw on all these and more so. So, even if there is a strong bent in one direction, don’t overlook others that may be there. One of the things about us humans is that we are complicated. Given that complexity, in my experience creating types or categories of thinkers and learners tends not to do a child (or adult) justice or to be especially helpful in the long run to the parents and teachers responsible for that child’s learning and education.

From this bigger picture of the child’s ways of making sense of things, you might focus in on the ***narrower piece of the child learning something specific***; for example, a task or skill. I often find it useful to think first of how the child positions themselves as a learner. Some children (and adults) tend to plunge right in or take some other “I’ll do it myself” approach. Some children (and adults) want a lot of time to observe and to practice privately on their own. Some of these same persons value the chance to sit alongside someone else doing the task and follow along, sometimes asking questions. Some children (and adults) want one-on-one instruction; others shy away from any direct contact with a teacher. Some children (and adults) like working on something new in a sort of social, cooperative group; others like to be on their own.

Again, the picture that emerges is complex. Much may depend on what is being learned and much may also depend on the degree of trust that exists between a child and a teacher or among a group of children. A way to get at this complexity is to think of how the child positions themselves when the task or skill to be learned is self-selected; next to that picture, reflect on how the child positions themselves when the task is assigned or has a strict time limit or is in other ways presumed. The contrast in these circumstances contributes nuance to the portrayal of the child as a learner.

Other slants you might try include: picturing the child’s responses when mistakes or accidents happen; when it is necessary to re-work or do something over; when there are interruptions; when the situation is highly competitive; when the child has options about leaving and returning to a task as compared to a start-to-finish expectation, etc. Or, you might think of specific skills the child has easily mastered and those that have been more difficult, giving particular attention to surrounding circumstances and other factors that have helped or hindered the child.

Thinking again more broadly, reflect on the subject matters or fields of study to which the child gravitates: for example, science, history, literature, art, drama, music, geography, math, etc. Note to yourself what seems to make these attractive and also how the child engages with them as a thinker and learner. Think, too, about how these interests might be supported, deepened and expanded. It's also worthwhile to give thought to the future and the learning opportunities that need to be sustained, and others that should probably be made available as they grow older. If there are disciplines the child finds boring or actively dislikes, reflect on those with particular attention to what seems to distance the child.

Finally, reflect on the standards the child tends to hold for themselves and how these may vary depending on circumstances. Think first about the child's own pride of work and in what places and circumstances that is visible and observable. A useful way to approach this is to think of times and pieces of work that have been really pleasing to the child, and then the converse — times and pieces of work that have been displeasing.

In a more general way, reflect on what seems to influence the value a child accords to their own work, when the work and learning are the child's choice. Think, too, of how that may be the same or different when the child finds the task to be mastered boring or distasteful or hard. Taking a slightly different approach, call to mind any situations that would allow you to glimpse how outside expectations and standards affect the child's learning and self-evaluation. It is also useful to give thought to how the child's standards mesh (or don't) with external standards held at school or home.

What I have outlined above asks for a lot of thinking and reflecting. It isn't necessary to do this all at once, nor is it important if there are sections under each heading that don't ring any bells. Ignore them. Equally, this is an outline and there is a lot that isn't touched on. Add in anything that comes to mind -- including other headings if that seems useful. Remember this is an exercise and an organizing device. Use it only to the degree that is helpful to you in picturing the child and expanding your understanding of them as a person.

As a conclusion to this exercise, and especially if the picture of the child has become very full and complex, I find it useful to write down words or phrases the child brings to mind. Some of these turn out to be images; others are simply vocabulary that seems particularly apt for describing the child. Quite often among these, there are ones that seem especially to capture the sense of the person. I remember, for example, a teacher's description of a child's way of moving and their way of thinking as "quick-silver"; or an image of a child's warmth and clarity that was made vivid by likening them to their own drawings and paintings in which there is often a suffusion of yellow light or a figure is seen through a transparent surface. I mention these for the reason that one of the yields of doing this kind of exercise is the discovery of a vocabulary that is particular to the child: not jargon, not labels, not categorizations or stereotypes, not empty generalizations applicable to virtually anyone and everyone.

I find this kind of recollecting children refreshing and renewing in my faith in our human-ness. I hope you will too. It is always easy to criticize and find fault with children (or other adults), to point out what they can't do and how problematic they are. It takes more time and patience to paint a fuller picture in which the person is understood to be not the sum of unchanging traits, but in process, in the making. Understood as active and open-ended, each of us is at any moment in our lives, and in all taken together, a complex blend of failings and virtues, of strengths and vulnerabilities. It seems to me that this is what makes us interesting and what makes education (and not merely training) a possibility. I hope you will also find the time it takes to look at children (and adults) this way worth the patience it requires.

I won't give this letter a formal closing, but simply extend my best to you and to all the children you attend to with care —