

## Wilma Heckler

My introduction to Pat Carini took place at the six-week Prospect School Summer Institute on descriptive child study in 1975. I had been a teacher for eighteen years, three of them teaching mathematics in junior high school and fifteen in the elementary school. From the beginning of my work, I was consistently interested in the way my students engage with materials, the quality of their interest and energy. Their different responses would provoke a lot of reflection on different ways to present materials. My principal at the junior high thought I should enter into a new program — a Masters in Guidance and Counseling which was offered to twenty-five candidates from different colleges in the City University of New York. She recommended me and I was accepted. I completed the program but remained in the classroom. The new perspectives deepened my understanding of children and helped me to look at their coping mechanisms.

During a five year maternity leave, I enjoyed mother two sons. When they were old enough for kindergarten and pre-school, I arranged for additional day care and returned to teaching. I started in New York City in 1962 and transferred to Hartsdale, NY, a prosperous Westchester County suburban community. In 1967, the New York State Education Department created a new school district in Hartsdale, integrating racially and economically diverse communities. The new district was called Greenburgh Central #7. It consisted of working class whites, affluent whites and Asians and was racially mixed with working class Blacks and middle class professional Blacks. Each class was populated with representation of all the different groups. Everyone was in school buses, as neighborhood schools were eliminated.

I taught 5th grade and had some students who did not yet read and some who were reading adult science fiction novels. I needed to learn how to cope with a wide range of difference. My interest in curriculum prepared me for a varied approach. The Hartsdale teachers had participated in a summer institute on Individualized Reading presented by Teacher's College, Columbia University. We were helped to organized a program tailored to each child and keep records of their progress. I had taken courses and continued studying ways of promoting mathematical understanding. I was experienced in using Cuisinaire Rods. I had used Dienes materials, blocks organized by base and by size. Dr. Zoltán Dienes was Director of the Psychomathematics Research Centre in Sherbrooke, Quebec, Canada at the time and was a mathematics consultant internationally. He offered multiple concrete approaches to mathematical understanding.

I began inquiring of friends and colleagues from various background whether there was anyone who was working with heterogeneous groups and was giving instruction in curriculum design. A friend knew about Professor Lillian Weber at the City College of New York Workshop Center for Open Education in Manhattan. Lillian recommended that I

attend a Sumer Institute under Celia Houghton, a British educator, at the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Greenwich, Connecticut. She also advised me to find other teachers who could form a group with common interest in what was known as Informal Education, so that I would not be singled out as the only person deviating from standard procedures. A group of us teachers enrolled in Celia's Summer Institute and then applied the insights and teachings to our classroom work.

After a few years of this very satisfying way of working with children I enrolled in a Master of Administration program at City College. I thought of working with teachers in a school committed to open education. I was ready for the Internship course, studying with a school principal. I was invited to join the staff at City College by taking a one-year sabbatical from my school district. I would be studying with two school principals who had highly developed open education school programs, which were part of the Open Corridor program started by Lillian Weber. I would also learn to work with teachers as an advisor, a position in the Open Corridor/Workshop Center programs, generally an experienced teacher supporting teachers working in open education classrooms. I accepted the invitation. In July of 1974 I began by assisting in the Workshop Center's Summer Institute. In the fall, under the supervision of experienced advisors and the principals of PS 84 and PS 75 —Lou Mercado and Sid Morison — I worked on my internship for the Masters in Education. I also became skilled in working as an advisor to classroom teachers.

As part of my City College experience, Lillian Weber recommended that I enroll in the Prospect School Sumer Institute in Bennington, Vermont. Most of the advisors and the Workshop Center staff and interested teachers from the Open Corridor schools had participated and the perspective offered made a profound difference in the reflective process.

In July 1975 I enrolled in the Prospect Summer Institute. Several colleagues from the area joined me in the experience. In my view, Patricia Carini's work was brilliant, scholarly, deeply philosophical and emotionally liberating. She understood human difference to be important and necessary in the creation of meaning and the vapping of life. She brought into the mix the philosophy of phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, a scholar who moved away from existentialism. Phenomenologists saw that every individual added unique perspective and meaning to life. By participating in the Summer Institute I was able to re-visit my life patterns and appreciate the consistency of my path. By observing the way an individual reacts and attaches meaning to experience, the world is greatly enriched. Placing observations in narrow categories or standards limits the understanding of the complexity of the person. I felt inspired into valuing my own life and committed myself to observe more carefully, to describe actual gesture, writings, drawings, more specifically. It changed the way I recorded information about my students and colleagues. When I returned to teaching my descriptions were reflective of the new ways of seeing. After the obligatory year back in the classroom after my sabbatical, I returned to City College as a working advisor. I helped to

communicate the ideas of descriptive observation as a way of understanding the students' ways of making meaning in response to classroom activities.

At one point when my son was considering questions of his career path, I arranged an internship for him at the Prospect School in Bennington. I felt that Pat's philosophy and open acceptance of differing perspectives would help him choose a career path. Prospect School was the schools that practiced child study as descriptive. I felt that he would find his strength and establish goals. In his case, he chose not to become a teacher. He enrolled in State of New York University at Albany in a Masters in Social Work. Later in life both his children were enrolled in schools with open education programs.

After years of advisory work, I was invited to join the faculty at City College. One needed to have a PhD to be considered. I enrolled in New York University's doctoral program in education. When it was time to write a thesis, I decided that I would do an ethnographic (descriptive) one rather than a statistical one, which was the prevailing approach in the NYU Education Department at that time. The supervisors were not happy with the idea, but I pointed out that all the top schools were allowing some non-statistical work and they would be offering opportunities which would maintain their reputation as an innovative institution. My proposal to do a descriptive study was approved. I defended my thesis in February 1983 and was awarded a Ph.D.

Unfortunately the City University had a hiring freeze, but I was subsequently appointed to the faculty of Touro College in NYC and was able to continue teaching the Carini perspective on observation and description of children.