



## The Descriptive Review of a Child

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*Adapted by Katy Kelly from “Making the Whole Student Visible: The Descriptive Review of a Child”, HORACE, 11/1996 – a process developed by Pat Carini at the Prospect Center in Bennington, Vermont for reflecting on students and their work.*

This process is not intended to solve a problem or change a child, rather it allows us to know her better — and as a result use that knowledge to better meet her academic, social, or physical needs.

**Time** (see facilitation tips)

Allow at least 90 minutes for the process and plan on pre-conferencing several days prior to the conference to allow participants time to reflect on the child and prepare their description. Times given below are guidelines only based on a 90 minute conference – they should be reviewed carefully in every pre-conference.

**Process** (see attached notes for details of each step)

- 1. Introductions** — facilitator introduces the presenters, the process, the child, and the focusing question (5 minutes)
- 2. Description of Child** — use prompts in notes (20 minutes)
- 3. Summary of Presentation, Dominant Themes, Patterns, Restatement of Focusing Question** — facilitator (5 minutes)
- 4. Other Descriptions** (10 minutes)
- 5. Restatement of Focusing Question** (5 minutes)
- 6. Clarifying/Probing Questions** from participants (15 minutes)
- 7. Pop-ups** — What did we hear you say — participants (5 minutes)
- 8. Summary of Presentation, dominant themes, patterns Restatement of Focusing Question** — facilitator (5 minutes)
- 9. Discussion/Recommendations** — participants (15 minutes)
- 10. Presenter Response** (5 minutes)
- 11. Debrief** (5 minutes)

## Facilitation Tips

1. Timing — the timing for this process depends on how many people are presenting and how many are participating. 90 minutes allows enough time to work through the process if timed out carefully. Two hours or more is better, especially if a parent is involved.
2. Presenters — usually there is one main presenter, most often a teacher with any number of additional interested parties — parents, counselors, other teachers, mentors, etc. who can offer different perspectives on the child. Generally, the more presenters the more time you need for the conference.
3. Parents as presenters — parents don't often get a chance to talk to a group of caring, interested people about their child. They know their child well and can add greatly to the conference. There may be times when it is difficult to include them or counter-productive. That is your call as facilitator. That said, once they are involved it's hard to tell a parent to stop talking so they can be tough to facilitate. Therefore it is important that they are involved in pre-conferencing and are aware of the process before they go into it.
4. Pre-conference — pre-conferencing far enough in advance of the conference allows the presenters important time to reflect on the child, collect information and prepare for their presentation.
5. Summarizing — facilitator should take careful notes and pay attention to any dominant themes or patterns that emerge, while keeping the group's attention fixed on the focusing question.

## Notes on Process

1. **Introductions** — facilitator introduces the presenters, the process, the child, and the focusing question. In introducing the child the facilitator may want, at this time, to give a thumbnail description of the child: grade, age, birth order, pseudonym if appropriate.
2. **Description of Child** — The presenting teacher may describe the classroom context if it would be helpful to participants: the room plan, setting, schedule, etc. Then she describes the child, including both characteristic and unusual behavior, using the prompts in the following categories:
  - a. **Physical Presence and Gesture** — Characteristic gestures and expressions: How are these visible in the child's face, hands, body attitudes? How do they vary, and in response to what circumstances (e.g. indoors and outdoors)? Characteristic level of energy: How would you describe the child's rhythm and pace? How does it vary? How would you describe the child's voice? It's rhythm, expressiveness, inflection? Disposition. How would you describe the child's characteristic temperament and its range (e.g. intense, even, up and down)? How are feelings expressed? Fully? Rarely? How do you "read" the child's feelings? Where and how are they visible? What is the child's emotional tone or "color" (e.g. vivid, bright, serene, etc.)?
  - b. **Relationships with Children and Adults** — Does the child have friends? How would you characterize those attachments? Are they consistent? Changeable? Is the child recognized within the group? How is this recognition expressed? Is the child comfortable in the group? How would you describe the child's casual, day-to-day contact with others? How does this daily contact vary? When there are tensions, how do they get resolved? How would you describe the child's relationship to you? To other adults?
  - c. **Activities and Interests** — What are the child's preferred activities? Do these reflect underlying interests that are visible to you? For example, does drawing or story writing center on recurrent and related motifs such as superhuman figures, danger and rescue, volcanoes and other large-scale events? How would you describe the range of the child's interests? Which interests are intense, passionate? How would you characterize the child's engagement with projects (e.g. quick, methodical, slapdash, thorough)? Is the product important to the child? What is the response to

mishaps, frustrations? Are there media that have a strong appeal for the child (e.g. paint, blocks, books, woodworking)?

**d. Formal Learning** — What is the child's characteristic approach to a new subject or process or direction? In learning, what does the child rely on (e.g. observation, memory, trial and error, steps and sequence, getting the whole picture, context)? How does that learning approach vary from subject to subject? What is the child's characteristic attitude toward learning? How would you characterize the child as a thinker? What ideas and content have appeal? Is there a speculative streak? A problem-solving one? A gift for analogy and metaphor? For image? For reason and logic? For insight? For intuition? For the imaginative leap? For fantasy? What are the child's preferred subjects? What conventions and skills come easily? Which are hard?

3. **Summary of Presentation**, dominant themes, patterns, Restatement of Focusing Question – facilitator
4. **Other Descriptions** — This should not be a repetition of the description already given but observations that build on it and furthers our insight into the child. It may include comments from people not present. If a parent is not present any important medical information supplied by the school or doctors should be presented at this time along with any other school documents or reports.
5. **Restatement of Focusing Question** — It is important to keep the group focused on the purpose of the conference.
6. **Clarifying/Probing Questions** from participants — These are burning questions — ones that participants feel they must have an answer to in order to go further. This opens out multiple perspectives and generates new information that may enhance the teacher's insights, expectations, or approach, or may even shift her focusing question itself. Start with clarifying and move to probing questions.
7. **Pop-ups** – What did we hear you say — The participants take turns making simple statements from their notes about what they have heard about the child.
8. **Summary of Presentation**, dominant themes, patterns, **Restatement of Focusing Question**
9. **Discussion/Recommendations** — participants discuss what they have heard and offer suggestions and recommendations. They may build on each other or contradict each other. These recommendations focus on ways to support the child's strengths – not change the child – and create harmony in her school life.
10. **Presenter Response** — the presenter may choose to comment on anything she has heard, answer any question that has come up or give any new insights she has gained. She is not obliged to do any of these.
11. **Debrief** — How did this process work for the presenter(s) in gaining new insights about the child? How was it for the participants? What implications emerged for their own practice. The facilitator should be given feedback at this time.