

## **Descriptive Review of a Child**

*An underlying assumption of the Descriptive Review Process is that each child is active in seeking to make sense of her or his experiences. By describing the child as fully, and in as balanced a way as possible, we begin to gain access to the child's modes of thinking and learning and to see their world from their point of view: what catches their attention, what arouses their wonder and curiosity/ what sustains their interests and purpose. (Prospect Center documentary processes, June 1986)*

### **1. STEP ONE: CONVENING THE SESSION**

Chairperson convenes the session asking Presenter to give:

- **Pseudonym of child and age**

Jacob, age 6

- **brothers and sisters and their ages**

(this is kind of hard to tell, since the story changes whenever I ask him)

4 brothers: 20 years old, 17 years old, 8 years old and 2 years old.

4 sisters: 15 years old, 13 years old and 10 years old, and 7 years old

Jacob says he always gets along with his siblings.

- **necessary context (You also will need to give the context of your classroom since the student will not be known to anyone.)**

Family: parents are from Liberia and are pastors. They founded the church in Liberia, then came to the U.S. and started a bible study in their basement, which has grown into a full church (I learned this from the church's website). The website says they have 9 children.

Classroom: 1<sup>st</sup> grade, general education classroom in Providence Public School. 25 kids in class. Pretty traditional classroom.

- **focusing question (using pseudonym)**

How can I harness Jacob's creativity and joy for learning, while helping him engage in more focused study.

### **2. STEP TWO: DESCRIBING THE CHILD**

Presenter reads their description of the child according to 5 headings. The portrayal is usually uninterrupted.

#### **1. Physical Presence and Gesture:**

- **Characteristic gestures and expressions: How are these visible in the child's face, hands, and body attitudes? How do these vary and in response to what circumstances (e.g. inside or outside)**

Jacob loves to touch things. He often has his hands on his face. He likes to touch his face, sometimes pulling on it, or sometimes just having his hands there. On the rug, he is sometimes intensely attentive, looking at the speaker and always raising his hand. Other times, he has a somewhat spaced out look on his face, like he is deep in thought about something else in his head. He likes to stretch on the rug, leaning over to one side and

putting one arm up. At times, he plays with other children, particularly D, who he is partners with. They sometimes bat at each other, or poke each other. Jacob is very affectionate with others, and does not have a clear sense of personal boundaries. He loves to give hugs and put his arm around other children (not always appreciated by others).

One thing I've noticed is that when Jacob is asked to pick something off the floor, which happens pretty frequently, he seems to get lost bending over. He leans down while still sitting on his chair (so he is basically upside down) and then stays down there for a *long* time. I'm curious what is going through his head at these times. Sometimes he falls off his chair.

Often, Jacob's movements are exaggerated, for show. For instance, he will bang his arm on something, then exaggerate his reaction, and then say, "I'm ok."

Jacob has a very hard time staying organized. The inside of his desk and top of his table are a mess, and he often loses pieces of activities (ex: words for a sort that he should be gluing onto a page).

Jacob also lacks some physical boundaries. He loves hugs, and putting his arm around other people, which some children do not appreciate, and tell him so.

Jacob always likes to have his hood on and repeatedly is reminded to take it off.

**• Characteristic level of energy: How would you describe the child's rhythm and pace? How does it vary?**

Jacob is usually high energy in the classroom. He loves to vocalize during free times, making jokes, making other people laugh (although they sometimes don't know what he is talking about), saying non sequiturs. On the rug I have noticed that he often sits still and is enthusiastic about participating. His body is usually in control on the rug. His pace is very up and down in the classroom. At times, he is focused and working quickly. Other times, he really drags.

**• How would you describe the child's voice (rhythm, expressiveness, and inflection)?**

Jacob is very expressive in the tone of his speech. He sometimes goes up at the end of his sentences. When he speaks, he often repeats the first few words of his sentence several times, as if gathering his thoughts. It often takes him a while to get to the point. When he is speaking, he seems to explore many related and unrelated thoughts in his mind before he gets to "the point." For example, I asked him to retell a story for me since his comprehension of the story was not quite there. I asked him a specific question about the text, and he started talking about unrelated things, that were only peripherally related to the story, however when I asked the question again in a more direct way, he answered. Sometimes it seems like he needs to get these other ideas out of his head before he reaches a more concise answer. He speaks in an excited and genuine manner, but also often speaks in a way that he thinks will make others laugh, sometimes a little like a cartoon (maybe imitating cartoon?). He sometimes speaks very slowly and sometimes not so slowly.

## **2. Disposition:**

**• How would you describe the child's characteristic temperament and its range (e.g., intense, even, lots of ups and downs)? 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)?**

Jacob is very loving towards most people in our class and readily expresses this love and encouragement (see more about this in Relationships with Children and Adults). Jacob is full of joy. He often laughs hysterically at things, for a long time. He smiles a lot.

Jacob seldomly gets visibly angry, although you can tell when he is upset, because he gets very sullen. It does not always last a long time, and he does not often vocalize his negative feelings. At times, he expresses frustration through words, but not often. He is has a bright disposition. While is he open with his love for other people, his emotions can be hard to read through what he says because the things he says are rarely direct.

When Jacob is asked to "clip down" on the clip chart, he does not get visibly upset usually. He also often does not honestly clip down. One day I knew he had been clipped down at least three times, but I looked at the clip chart and he was still on green. I asked him about it, and he tried to tell me that he was telling the truth, but when he could tell that I knew, he kind of shut down and didn't want to talk. After a while of trying to talk and him being silent, I said, "Maybe you're not ready to talk yet. Do you think you're ready to talk?" And then he nodded his head and started explaining.

## **3. Relationships with Children and Adults:**

**• Does the child have friends? How would you characterize these attachments? Are they consistent? Changeable? Is the child recognized within the group? How is that expressed by others? Is the child comfortable in the group? How would you describe the child's casual, day-to-day contact with others? How does that vary? When there are tensions, how do they get resolved? How would you describe the child's relationship to you? To other adults?**

Jacob was new to the school this year, and most of the rest of the class was altogether in Kindergarten, so he was coming into a somewhat cohesive group. I have seen some more consistent friendships form for him, but he sometimes does things on his own. With another boy in the class, I have seen them start to sit next to each other consistently on the rug (and often talk to each other throughout the greeting). Jacob often puts his arm around this student and they lean on each other (physically). When asked who his best friends in the class were, Jacob named four girls and said that they like to play together at recess. I have noticed that he likes to talk to girls, although I'm not always sure how the girls feel about him. He said that some boys in other classes bully him and say that he is not good at anything. He initially said boys in our class don't do this to him, but then later changed and said that they do, and that he is not really friends with boys in our class. Right after he said this, however, I saw him walking out of the classroom with his arms around two other boys.

He sometimes has trouble working with partners because he is very distractible and has trouble keeping track of materials. Other students tend to try to correct him, and he occasionally responds. For example, during Center Time, he was at the listening center drawing the characters and setting of the story. He did not understand what to do, and had drawn an unrelated picture. Another student explained what to do, and he started to erase his picture in order to do it over. He can also be very encouraging of other students when working. Once on the rug, I saw him give a high five to his partner and say, "Good job bro! Nice one!" He also says things like, "You can do it!" when people go up to the board to do things. Jacob is very complimentary of other students. About a few of the girls he said, "that's my girl!" or he talks about how they are smart. It is sometimes hard to tell if it is genuine or if he is doing it to be funny.

He also expresses his love for other students by giving them high fives and putting his arms around other people. Once he came into the classroom, and a student was waiting there who is only in our classroom for part of the day because he is also in the behavior classroom. Jacob said, "Hey!" and gave the student high five, which prompted other students to do the same. Jacob then asked if he could give the student a hug, and the student responded, "No, thank you."

One day in small math group, one girl was upset. She was crying, and I asked her what was wrong, and she said another student had said that no one liked her. I asked the other student to apologize and asked her to ask the upset student what she could do to make her feel better. Jacob said, "Yeah, what can we do to make you feel better? We love you!"

Jacob is not loving and encouraging 100% of the time, though. For instance, once I saw him cover his ears when another student was talking.

He does not often get into big conflicts with other kids, although they sometimes get annoyed at his lack of personal boundaries. Another student (A) was annoyed that Jacob was saying that A was another student's cousin. A was fuming because he was so angry. A and Jacob talked it out successfully. A said, "I don't like it when you say I'm L's cousin." Jacob said, "I heard you say you don't like it when I say you're L's cousin." Then he went on to say something about how he doesn't want to hurt him and how he wants to be his friend because he loves him.

Jacob can be self-aware in groups in that he says things he thinks are funny, but he often is not always in tune with the general mood of the classroom, and kind of does his own thing. For instance, when he is called to come up to the front of the rug, he often makes a show of it, when everyone else has come up calmly.

Jacob wants love from adults. He formed a connection with Mr. Peter, who was in our room as a one-on-one for another student, but often worked with Jacob at Centers. Mr. Peter doesn't come anymore. One day Jacob made a comment about what Mr. Peter would say if he were there, and that he was Mr. Peter's favorite student (other students agreed).

At the beginning of the year, especially, he wanted lots of hugs from my mentor teacher and me. He told me that he wished I could come to the park with him on his birthday. He has said "I love you," to me multiple times. For instance, once I was sitting on a bench during a

lesson. It was his turn to sit on the bench while others were on the rug, but he had to go on the rug into a circle for a bit. When he returned, I got up to move to a different spot so he could have his spot back on the bench. When I got up he hugged me and said, “love you!”

Another time I was sitting in the rocking chair when students came back from recess. They were not expecting to see me because it was a day on which I usually leave before recess. He came into the classroom, and ran to me and said, “Ms. Weisberg!” and jumped entirely onto my lap, kind of straddling me.

#### **4. 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, manipulatives, books, computer)?**

At home, Jacob says that he likes to do karate. He often talks about karate at school and practices or shows kids at recess and he told me that he takes lessons. He also says that he plays some video games about basketball at home. He frequently mentions *Madea*, which is from the Tyler Perry movie, *Madea's Happy Family* (he told me it was called *Madea Happy Family Reunion*). He said that he often watches this movie at home.

I would not describe Jacob's interests as particularly pronounced or passionate, but there are definitely recurring topics that he talks about and recurring things that he will say. For instance, he recently has often talked about “getting fat,” or “losing weight.” He often mentions this topic when responding to an unrelated question, or finds a way to weave it into a slightly related question (e.g. retelling a story about a pig who ate too much brownie batter and got sick).

At school, Jacob's interests are not skewed particularly towards one subject or another. He can be very interested or very distracted depending on the day, time or mood. Jacob often jumps right into projects, but then gets distracted by something else. There is not much project-based learning in our classroom, so I have not had a lot of opportunities to see how he works on projects independently. If Jacob is left to do work alone, he often ends up coloring very heavily on the piece of paper. He does not seem to be concerned much about how the final product looks. If corrected, Jacob does not often get frustrated, but does not always change his course of action either.

## **5. Formal Learning:**

**• What is the 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?**

Jacob is often excited about new material. He often enthusiastically participates on the rug during Reading Street lessons, and it is clear that he is paying attention. His eyes are on the teacher for the most part and he says all the words that he is supposed to say. If something is happening near him that is out of the ordinary, though, he can get distracted. For instance, once an adult was having a conversation with a child next to Jacob and he was listening into their conversation very intently. He seems to either get a new topic right away, or stay stuck on a misunderstanding for a while, reluctant to let it go.

Jacob often has trouble remembering what he is supposed to be doing when he is working independently, and so sometimes he dives in with whatever idea he has. Often it seems as if he does know what to do, but just has to wade through some other thoughts and ideas first. Sometimes it just click, but it takes some prompting from adults. He also can just sit there talking and not getting to work if not encouraged. He often gets distracted by little things and work takes him a long time. A lot of what he gets distracted by is touching things, like organizing manipulatives over and over. This seems to be the case for all subjects, but I think Jacob's grasp on reading and writing is a little better than on math, meaning that he stays on course more often during these activities (I rarely see writing, though), than in math, when he often gets distracted by materials.

The times I see him the most focused are on the rug during Reading Street. He seems to loves to music and rhythm, and sometimes beat boxes along with the Reading Street songs.

In my small reading and math group, Jacob is often talking about random things. For instance, once I called on him to answer a question and he said, "I'm not getting fat, I'm losing weight." Another time he was reading a book about snakes and said, "Snakes don't like brown people."

I think vocalizing is important for Jacob when he is working in order to kind of let out all the thoughts in his head. During Center Time, he is endlessly vocalizing. In a short time of observing him at a center, Jacob talked about many things, which weren't very related to the work or what other kids were talking about: "Q just don't listen when I tell her to stop touching me!" "I used to wear pampers, but I don't." "Who's afraid of the big bad wolf?" While he was talking about these things, he was working (although not always doing exactly what the task required).

**• What is the child's characteristic attitude toward learning?**

Jacob is an enthusiastic learner. He is curious and says that he likes all subjects in school. I have not heard him complain that he is bored in school, however he does sometimes get frustrated when he is redirected to be more on task.

- **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?**

Jacob seems to often have many strands of thoughts going in his head at once, and is working on sorting them out. He thinks deeply about things, but many things at once, and sometimes thoughts will emerge at later times, as if he has been mulling something over for a while. In what he says, and presumably what he thinks, he weaves together references from throughout his life at all times.

- **What are the child's preferred subjects? What conventions and skills come easily? Which are hard?**

Jacob seems to like all subjects, but literacy seems to come easier to him than math. Jacob is on-level in reading (slightly on the low side). He reads many sight words accurately, but struggles a lot with comprehension and retelling, possibly because there are so many thoughts in his head at once.

He sometimes struggles in math to keep track of things. His materials often end up on the floor, and he spends more time trying to keep everything straight than actually completing the task he is supposed to complete.

## **6. Summing Up: The presenter characterizes the child's strengths and vulnerabilities.**

### **STEP THREE: RESTATING THE THEMES**

Chairperson makes a short restatement of the portrayal, calling attention to the dominant themes running through the picture presented.

### **STEP FOUR: OTHER DESCRIPTIONS**

If appropriate other staff who have had the child or observed for purposes of the review give descriptions (not normally the case in this class, but works if done in one school).

Chairperson summarizes that and provides other relevant personal information sparingly, to avoid hearsay unless a family member co-presenting.

### **STEP FIVE: QUESTIONS ABOUT CHILD FROM THE GROUP**

Chairperson opens the review for the questions and comments of the teachers participating in the review. The first round should be questions asking for clarification of the portrait to help the Presenter see things and say things that h/she might have missed.

### **STEP SIX: RECOMMENDATIONS**

At the close of the discussion, the Chairperson briefly restates new information gained from the questions, restates the focusing question, and asks for recommendations.

Chairperson groups the recommendations as a way of "pulling together" a final statement about the review, plans for a follow-up on the child, and asks for a critique of the process, by the Presenter.

## **Reflection**

My group had some very good thoughts about Jacob and some good suggestions for ways that I could help him focus. A big theme for Jacob is that he has lots of thoughts going on in his mind at once. One insight from Shelbi was that he might have his hood on because he has too many thoughts and hearing other noises is too overwhelming for him. This reminds me of a time that I saw him covering his ears when someone was speaking. I think checking in with him about what he is thinking in these times is important in order to better understand what is going on in his mind, and to help him identify why he might be having trouble focusing.

Another thing that my group recognized is that Jacob often processes through vocalizing, and that it is important to let him vocalize, but to help him understand when the right time to do so is. In terms of focusing Jacob on a question, I think having him repeat the question before answering is important.

I like the idea of a checklist for Jacob when he is doing work, but I think that there would need to be a lot of prepping and practicing in order for it to be successful. In the same vein, giving Jacob the skills he needs to identify what he needs to complete a task would be really useful.

I think this session, and this process as a whole, reminded me that it is important to figure out what is going on in a child's mind before making snap judgments about them, especially for someone like Jacob, who has so many enthusiastic and loving sentiments that could be harnessed in a positive way. Jacob is someone who does not necessarily conform to what teachers "want to see" in a classroom that is controlled in a traditional way, but he has a lot of positive attributes that can contribute to a strong classroom community. He is a student for whom extra supports and scaffolding could teach him skills to be very successful in school. Doing a Descriptive Review of a Child is especially for children who have the potential of being labeled as "disruptive" or having an attention deficit disorder. Coming to a mutual understanding with a child of tools that can help them be successful can help both parties be patient.

Overall, the experience of going through the process of a Descriptive Review of a Child convinced me that I would like to pursue opportunities to find (or create) supportive teacher communities (like the one discussed in El-Haj) that engage in this process on a regular basis. It was eye-opening to study a child in such depth, and it made me realize that there is so much more to know about him, and all the other students in my classroom. It is also gratifying and useful to hear others' perspectives on a child. I think their suggestions if I had had more time to describe the child and tell more stories.

## **Notes from conversation:**

- Seizing opportunities to let him collect materials or pass out papers.
- Using his love of touching things to your advantage
- What is holding him when he gets distracted?
- Is he thinking about family?
- Is he looking at how the desk is put together?
- Why is he being squirmy – too much stuff in the room?
- Trying to empower him by saying I really want your opinion on this new thing we're doing. Does that focus him?
- Checklist – for example – make a list of how to put away rocks. Pictures and words?
- Just say checklist to reinforce what he should be doing at any given time



- Talk to him about it when he is off task – what is difficult about it, what are things you need to complete this task?
- Important to help him build the verbal muscle to vocalize what he is feeling
- Value in letting him be comfortable speaking
- Ask him what he would ideally work on
- What kind of project?
- The personal boundaries and the not sensing the mood of the class might be more of a problem later when he is older. Work on that, but don't tell him that we don't want to hear your jokes, or don't want to give him hugs.
- When he is giving a response, have him restate the question first before he answers the question. I like this idea.
- Could this be adapted for assessing the mood of the class?
- Give him warning for when he is going to have to answer the question
- Everything he is doing socially is positive but he needs to recognize that there is a time and place
- Point out how helpful it is when he is in control on the rug – this is what we're aiming for.
- Make a point of recognizing when he is respecting boundaries and when he is doing the opposite.
- Really curious how his brain works – is the reason he's putting up his hood because it's too much coming at him? – ask him why he wants to put his hood up.
- Could Jacob help me with a calming activity for the class? Something karate related?