



In 2004, the Spencer Foundation in Chicago gave NDSG funds to start up an oral history collection to be housed in its archive at the University of North Dakota's Chester Fritz Library. Made up at this point of taped interviews with fellow conferees in the NDSG circle past and present, the collection is an ongoing effort, first of all to help us recall and honor the various pasts that unite us as a democratic community, and secondly to serve the need every democratic community has for its members to utter their stories--not so as to convey some particular messages but primarily and simply to speak and be heard. For a good 25 years now there has been a depression in the ability of American

Alice Seletsky: 1929 - 2009

"The complexity of things--the things within things--just seems to be endless. I mean nothing is easy.

Nothing is simple." ¹

Arthur Tobier: When did you graduate from high school, and from where?

Alice Seletsky: I think it was '47, from Music & Art (NYC). In the January class. Because we had those half years. We changed class every six months and I started in February.

AT: Music & Art had a golden reputation.

AS: Oh, yeah. It was terrific. It was a whole new kind of experience. My other school experience had been just sort of ordinary. Benign, but ordinary.

society, as our colleague, the late Lillian Weber, once so aptly put it, to help school teachers visualize possibility: **We have a depression in our visualization of possibility right now and I'm saying that it's both the task and the challenge to keep alive the visions that do exist, even if you can't use them right away.** By locating our members' actual experiences in a textured historical 'telling,' we are trying here to bring forward and share a ratifying sense of movement, process, and direction that Weber's remarks alluded to. The democratic argument here is that, through practices acquired over the push and pull of the last 40 years, understandings gleaned from multi-cultural and multi-generational experiences, and values that have been generated thereby--coaxed into being, nourished, and held--we have more to work with than is ordinarily acknowledged.

AT: You were a girl from the Bronx.

AS: I was a girl from the Bronx. Prospect Avenue in the Bronx.

AT: Which meant what?

AS: Which meant taking piano lessons, of course. Because that's what we did. My cousin Imena, who lived around the corner from us and who was part of the extended family, also played piano (although much better than I did), so there was that sort of tradition. She also preceded me at Music and Art. And I studied with the same piano teacher, who was Armenian, of course; a young man, who—

AT: Why "of course"?

AS: Well, because we were very ethnocentric in that way. Not fully assimilated yet.

AT: Your family was Armenian?

AS: Turkish-Armenian. Armenians from Turkey, caught in that awful genocide, and the diaspora, who then ended up here, very connected to people from the same village. And some members of that extended clan lived near us in the Bronx. We were, most of us, members of the Armenian Church in Washington Heights: Holy Cross. Originally the family had been connected to the Armenian church on 30th Street in Manhattan, St. Gregory's. That was a very political church.

AT: Political in what sense?

AS: Political in the Armenian political sense: anticommunist, anti-Soviet, and nationalists. In fact, that was the church in which the bishop, or archbishop, whatever he was, was assassinated, stabbed, by radical nationalists.

AT: When you were a child?

AS: I must have been 5 or 6, something like that. It happened, I think, in the early '30s. It was quite notorious. For a while, everybody talked about it. My family was not particularly political, except insofar as everybody who was Armenian was. You couldn't be apolitical, given the circumstances.

AT: That left its mark on you...

AS: Well, in a sense.

AT: On your imagination.

AS: Left its mark on my imagination. Also gave me a sense of connectedness. Ethnicity connectedness. Which was a very mixed blessing because I also—I must have said this before—I also wanted to be a 'proper' American, and very much so. In the Mickey Rooney/Andy Hardy tradition.

AT: ...the movie version of America.

AS: The movie version of America, quite right. That romanticized adolescent dream of driving around in jalopies, and having parents and neighbors who were American through and through, and not this peculiar ethnicity, which was mostly *unknown* to people. And being that my maiden name was Zakarian, in school I was always at the end because they seated us alphabetically: the last seat in the last row. Until high school. In high school there was a boy named Nathan Zbarski in many of my classes. I was "Za;" he was "Zb". And so I was finally not the last one. But I felt that ethnicity always sort of as double-edged.

AT: A pressure?

AS: It was a pressure, partly because there was some impulse to conform to those who were some imagined ideal type. Not a rigid demanding sort of thing, but there was a kind of feeling that I should blend in.

AT: Did elementary school help you deal with that feeling?

AS: I was very fortunate. In the part of the Bronx where we lived Prospect Avenue was ethnically very mixed. There were Jewish families (I had mostly Jewish kids in my classes.) There were a few Armenian families. Also we had Black families; a lot of them, and an influx of Latino families, all sort of coming around the same time, starting in the middle of WW11. So it was a very diverse neighborhood and a diverse school class. And that was good. And then, around 5th grade, maybe 4th grade—I would have to figure out the years—we began to get some German

children, refugees who had just escaped from Germany. I have a vivid memory of two of them: a brother and sister. They were English-speaking. In fact, they were very fluent. And older than us, but put in our class anyway, for whatever reason. The girl's name was Herta. And her brother, whose name was Kurt, wore *lederhosen*, which I found strange. I guess he felt that was kind of an official uniform, or his best clothes? Who knows? They were certainly not poor. And it was very interesting to sort of know them. They didn't say a whole lot about their circumstances, but you sort of had a sense that they were also immigrants: foreign people. I don't remember what the teacher said about it at all, but I remember them quite clearly. The German part of it, I don't think, was as interesting to me as the fact that they were so distinctly not American. And so distinctly characterized by accented speech. And I'll never forget the *lederhosen*. It was not a time when boys in the Bronx wore shorts very often. They wore knickers and knee socks, but shorts were uncommon. So that was elementary school.

AT: ...so ethnicity—or what matters about ethnicity--was always part of the day?

HS: It was always part of that kind of neighborhood. Being part of a mixed neighborhood produces heightened ethnicity awareness.... But high school was different. It was just a whole new experience because I was not an accomplished musician; I wasn't even terribly interested in music. Music & Art exposed me to all this terrific stuff, including students who were much more sophisticated and literate than me, much more interested in the world. My father used to take me to the museums around the city: I think he saw it as a necessary piece of my acculturation. But in high school my classmates and I got to go to museums whenever we wanted, which was a whole new thing. Like going to the Museum of Modern Art, which was sort of a favorite destination, although I'm not sure why.

AT: You're not sure why you went?

AS: Well, I went because art, visual art, was part of the whole context of high school. People painted, we had art exhibits. There were obligatory classes for the music majors, and some of my friends were art students, so there was just a general enthusiasm to do

it... we also went to concerts. We went to the old Metropolitan Opera on 39th Street. Standing-room seats cost next to nothing. Another favorite place was Lewisohn Stadium, on Convent Avenue, which also cost very little.

AT: A general aesthetic richness.

AS: Yes, yes, and much of it had to do with that kind of high school. The student body was selected, I'm sure, partly on the basis of academic achievement, but not entirely. They were either musicians or graphic artists and some of them were not super brilliant types. But those folks were very talented. Very talented folks who didn't give two hoots for literature and language and poetry and all that stuff.

AT: But they cared about musical ideas.

AS: ...Musical ideas, yeah. Very focused on those things, and also painting.

AT: Where were you in that crowd?

AS: I was not very focused. I mean, I enjoyed music, but I never intended to make it a career. I mostly discovered the world through books. I had always been a reader, from the time I started reading Dick and Jane.

AT: Where did you get books?

AS: The public library near where I lived. From about age eight on, it was one of the few places in the neighborhood I was allowed to go to by myself. You could take out six books and four magazines at a time, and I did that each time. And four days later I took them back in exchange for more. The librarian got to know me. I exhausted the children's section, which was not very large, fairly early on. And then she would pick out books for me from the adult section, which pleased me deeply. At Music & Art I found teachers who would do that--expose me to literature in their English classes. Interestingly enough, I don't remember what we read: not until senior year. The chairman of the department led an English honors class for the whole year, for which you had to be picked, and I was picked. We read T. S. Eliot, I remember. I think that was my introduction to the

High Tradition of literature. I didn't understand a word. I mean, I read it all and I listened and I took notes, but I was puzzled by it. But who cared? It was words and language, and I liked it, so I kept on. We did Shakespeare. We did *Romeo and Juliet*. When I started college, I was going to be a psychology major for reasons that are totally mysterious to me, but I changed very rapidly because I found the subject incredibly boring, and I became an English major. And then as I started to do that, I discovered mythology. And that put me on a course that has stayed quite steady over all these years. I read mythology in translation. And then in probably the end of my sophomore year, or maybe junior year, I had to declare a minor, so I settled on Homeric Greek (which also fulfilled my language requirement, because we had to have a language). I used to just love, love to read *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and read them both in Greek.

AT: Where was this?

AS: At NYU: Washington Square College. So once I started that, I was just ... captivated, and did it for two years, the last two years of my degree. In fact, many years later, while already teaching, I found a little group of people who were reading Homer together with their teacher, who was Vera Lachman from Brooklyn College, meeting on Saturdays at her apartment and reading 50 lines of Homer in Greek, and joined in. I did that for maybe, I don't know, 10 years or so. Those were my passions. And Homer still is, although I don't read Greek any more because it's too hard. Now I read the new translations. I also got very interested in Milton, of all things. But wait, before Milton was medieval literature. Margaret Schlaub was on the faculty, and she was a great medievalist, so I took a bunch of courses with her. And she, a few years later--she was a devout communist--a few years later went to Poland surreptitiously, and established herself there and lived there for the rest of her career. She was a terrific teacher.

AT: Anyone ever hear from her again?

AS: I don't know. We never, I mean, we didn't know her well enough, those of us—you know there was that bunch of people in college who took courses with the same professor so you got to know each other just

because you had that shared interest, but nobody ... it wasn't very personal.

AT: Sounds like you had an intense time at NYU.

AS: A very powerful time ... yeah. Even in that school of 10,000, 20,000, however many there were. In addition we had all the wonders of Greenwich Village to draw from: the San Remo Café, the Minetta Tavern, and so on, which I managed to enjoy extensively. And then I started graduate school, but didn't last there very long. I think I did it for—I took a great Chaucer course. That was memorable. And then through somebody I'd met in one of my classes, I got a job at *Publisher's Weekly*. It was a nothing job—doing proofreading and things like that. But it was good. It paid a salary.

AT: It was bottom line.

AS: Bottom line, right.

AT: Bottom rung of the ladder to where you wanted to go.

AS: That's right. But also there was one great benefit, and that was that *Publisher's Weekly* carried little reviews of all the books that were published. If you could get assigned a review to write--not a blurb, but sort of a summary: 10 lines of whatever, maybe 50 words, you'd get to keep the book. That was thing one. And thing two, at the end of the year they had shelves full of books, and in rank order, starting with the president, you had your pick of 10 books at a time, until the supply was exhausted. And I still have some of those books. I mean, I've never read them. But to have them! Books were always wonderful. Owning them, and keeping them, was just very important. That job lasted a couple of years.

AT: What year was that?

AS: We're talking about, let me think... '51... well, it was between '51 and '55. And another job I had in that period was at an advertising agency. No, I think I went to the advertising agency first, right out of college, which was a terrible job. Didn't stay very long. And then I got the job at *Publisher's Weekly*. And then...

AT: It doesn't sound like you had an easy time of it, reaching the world you wanted to be in.

AS: Well, I didn't know what world I wanted to be in. I had these great aspirations to be a writer, of course. And so I did some writing, but I was not devoted to it.

AT: You weren't disciplined enough.

AS: I was not only not disciplined, but I didn't even know how much I wanted to do it. You know, it was like a wonderful, romantic fantasy to sit at a typewriter and live in Greenwich Village, where I lived during and after college, and spend a couple hours patiently writing short stories that were rejected by wherever I sent them. I never took any writing courses, which is interesting, as I think back. And then in '55 we got married.

AT: You met your husband Harold —

AS: Actually I met Harold at an Armenian wedding. He was playing in the band. They had an American band and an Armenian band because it was an Armenian wedding. The leader of the Armenian band was a friend and fellow composition student of Harold's. He had hired Harold to play saxophone in the American band, and I was a guest at the wedding.

AT: He asked you to dance.

AS: No, he was playing, and I was plucking. Actually we did dance. And we got married, and then we went to Houston, Texas. He got a job playing clarinet with the Houston Symphony, and I was pregnant. And we stayed there one season and came back. And then it was quite difficult financially. He was teaching, writing, studying with Mr. Schmid-- this famous teacher, Josef Schmid, who was a student of Alban Berg's, who was a student of Schoenberg's, and so on and so on, and we needed money, it was very tight. I was doing little jobs like typing envelopes at home and all of that, but nothing that yielded real money. And then Robin was born, 2-1/2 years after Susan. And when she was 3, and Susan was 5, and in kindergarten, I met some other mothers...

AT: Where was this?

AS: We were living in the Bronx. Originally, after Houston, we lived in Queens. Then we got a very cheap apartment in the Bronx, near Tremont Avenue. So one morning, I was chatting with a group of mothers and one of them, in response to my tale of woe about being financially strapped, said, "Oh! Get a license as a sub! You go down to the Board of Ed on Livingston Street, you walk in the door, they'll give you the test, they'll give you the physical, and they'll give you the license before you leave."

AT: The Board of Ed was hard up for teachers at this time?

AS: Oh, desperate, desperate. This must have been around '60, '61. There was a terrible shortage, and that's literally what they did, and that's literally what I did.

AT: Why was there such a shortage?

AS: I don't know. Possibly because salaries were very low, and working conditions were not terrific, and the schools that needed the most teachers were in the poorest neighborhoods. All you needed was a B.A., so I went and I got it. They gave me the physical, they gave me the TB test, they gave me the exam, whatever it was. And before I left, they gave me a license, which empowered me to teach.

AT: This is in one day?

AS: A day. I went at 9:00 and by 3:00 I was out the door. When I brandished my license to my friend the next day, she said, "Call the neighborhood schools." Because you wanted to be in the neighborhood. The kids were in school, and I had to be close by. She said call the neighborhood schools and ask them to contact you when they need a sub. So I did. I very wisely did not go to the school where Susan was enrolled at that time, but I went to a school not too far away, and I called...

AT: What school was that?

AS: I don't know. P.S. something.

AT: What street was it on?

AS: It was on...let me see. If I walk down Tremont to Burnside Avenue, and turn left, past Webster, somewhere in there. PS—was it like a 30 something? I don't know. But it was ... and there was a library on that street, too, if I remember ...on Burnside. Anyway, it was walking distance.

AT: You walked along and just picked it out.

AS: I figured out which was the next closest school, and that was it. So I went there. And then my friend told me--I can't remember her name--but she said, "There's another school, somewhat larger. It is not such a terrific place, but they have a bigger staff, and so they have a bigger need." The first one was a very sweet little school. And it was fun to teach there. The other one was big; Earl Kurtz, someone who later would figure in my teaching career more prominently, was Assistant Principal. I think the school must have been near 3rd Avenue and 149th Street. It wasn't exactly walking distance, but it wasn't terribly far from where I lived. I could get there by subway or something like that. It was a short ride, and they did need a lot of subs. So I went there and left my name, and they called me every day.

AT: No training at this point.

AS: Zero. When I got the license, I was required to take, I think, like 20 credits, or 16 credits, of education courses within three years. I enrolled at Hunter College, but being in no hurry, I took one course at a time. And they were awful! And silly...

AT: What was silly about them?

AS: They were completely irrelevant! I mean, they didn't have anything to do with what I was supposed to do, which was to walk into a classroom of totally strange kids—and if I was lucky, there would be some kind of lesson plan; most of the time there wasn't—and teach them something. It was very difficult. But I must say, I was not invested in succeeding. I just wanted to survive from 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. without any great disasters and send the kids home and come home to my family. There was a sort of interest on my part, because it was a totally new thing, but I didn't know what I was doing. And nobody much cared, as long as the kids did not destroy themselves, or the

room, or me. I was already probably 30. I had children, I had a family, I thought of myself as an adult. I compared myself to some of the young teachers who would come in and walk out; young women who had just graduated, who had just gotten a license, and found the situation totally intolerable.

AT: They were basically still adolescents.

AS: They were still adolescents. They were very inexperienced. They didn't have, most of them, any real presence. They were those girls with poofy hair.

AT: No grounding.

AS: Not much, not much. Some of them were very nice. I guess they wanted to be teachers, but who knows. So I would choose particular days that I would be willing to work. I didn't want to work full time because it was just too hard on the kids and on Harold and my neighbors who had to fill in the gaps when Robin was home sick or Harold had an appointment. It worked out reasonably well, and I got a paycheck. And somewhere along the way...I should have said this earlier: I've always been interested in handicrafts. My mother was a wonderful seamstress and milliner; made all my clothes. And it was just part of the family culture. So I knew how to sew and knit and liked crafts. When I realized that I had to do something to survive in these classrooms, besides scream at kids, I decided to make a shopping bag and fill it--there were virtually no supplies anywhere. If they were available, they were under lock and key. I mean, not even--

AT: You were still a sub?

AS: I was a sub, yeah. I was a sub for a long time, maybe three to four years.

AT: And the conditions in which you were expected to operate?

AS: Let me tell you. The first school had desks that were screwed to the floor. That was thing one. I think that was the school I started to teach at, P.S... Why can't I remember that P.S? It'll come to me. Desks and chairs fixed to the floor. Very overcrowded. The school was on double session. One group of kids and teachers came from 7:30 to noon, I think, and then

they had lunch and gym. And a second group came in at 11:00, had their lunch and went to class until 4:00 or something like that. So these two batches of kids and no room really belonged to anybody. That was thing two. And if the kids were lucky--I taught the upper grades, which felt more comfortable to me, and where the greater need was. They were more likely to hire early childhood licensed people for the kindergarten, first grade classes. I taught 4th grade, 5th grade, and 6th grade—if the kids were lucky, they had a set of readers, usually; maybe a set of math books, workbooks that you couldn't write in—and everything was spotted. There was nothing new and fresh. Very little stuff on the walls, so you couldn't get a clear sense of what anybody was studying. Always a map...

AT: A map of Europe in the 16th Century.

AS: Whatever! There was a map, and you could talk about it; you could do things with it. I happened to like maps anyway, so I always used the maps. And after awhile I found other maps; I became a forager; and a maker of teaching materials on the cheap. It was a great thing when we didn't have to do mimeographs anymore, when we got that--it wasn't the Xerox machine--what was that thing with purple ink that you printed? You could actually write on the thing and make duplicates without having to cut stencils. Stencils were very hard to make.

AT: The rexograph.

AS: Oh yeah.

AT: The high-water mark of school technology at the time.

AS: Very much so. But you didn't have much access to paper. If you were lucky, or if you knew your assistant principal very well, you got a couple of boxes of crayons and drawing paper. That was about it. Schools were, physically, not in very good condition either. And because of the overcrowding there was always noise and banging around and kids running up and down and all of that. Especially in these huge buildings.

AT: Were there staff meetings?

AS: I didn't have to attend any of those. I was subbing.

AT: You just came in with your pocketbook.

AS: Well, here's what happened. I discovered--Marion, her name was, the mother who put me onto subbing. Marion whatever. She said, "Make yourself a couple of shopping bags. Buy crayons. Buy paper. Buy whatever. Jars of paste, pencils, a few other things. And go to the library and look at [*Instructor*] magazine, because they have ideas for arts and crafts that are easy." She said, "Fill those shopping bags and take them with you when you go in to sub, and walk into the room before the kids get there, put the shopping bags on the desk, so that they'll see them when they come in, and they'll say, 'What's that? What's that?' and you say, 'After we do math and penmanship and map study, we're going to do arts and crafts.'" And then they'd have something to take home with them at the end of the day. So that worked pretty well. I had some serious disasters, but I learned quickly what worked and what didn't work. P.S. 92 is another school where I subbed.

AT: Where is 92?

AS: Also in the East Bronx. Right on Tremont, between--why don't I remember this? I worked there for 12 or 13 years. Mr. Kurtz, the AP at the first school where I worked, became principal there. Big school. At max, we were on triple session. We must have had between 2,000 and 2,500 children on our register. The triple session worked so that one batch came very early, and then they went to fill in the gym and the auditorium, while another batch came to those seats, and then a third group. That was in the lower grades, because the upper grades still were not as overcrowded. We only had double session there. Eventually they opened a new school to ease the crowding.

AT: You were still a sub at 92?

AS: I was a sub when I started, and then in the fourth year I finally got my regular license; I became a regular sub.

AT: At that point, what sustained your interest in teaching? The paycheck?

AS: The paycheck, for sure, but also the challenge. Frankly I had become more interested. I began to sort of figure out what my job was supposed to be.

AT: Delinquency wasn't a problem?

AS: No, no. And I didn't have to do a whole lot of preparation, except for keeping my shopping bags well-supplied, and continuing my subscription to *Instructor* magazine, all of whose articles I kept squirreled away so I'd have new ideas. Subbing meant going to different classrooms without warning, so I came prepared. Soon I had this reputation: "If she comes, you'll be able to do this stuff that she brings with her." And I used that carrot quite judiciously, because I would say, "Ah, if this goes on, you're not going to be able to paste that together!"

AT: You maintained a sense of humor through all of this.

AS: To the extent that I could. I don't want to romanticize it. It was very hard, and doing it with totally strange kids was just about impossible.

AT: What about your colleagues? Did they help?

AS: My colleagues, when I joined the staff at PS 92, were very important. Most of the teachers were older. They were women who had been educated in the Depression. Mostly children of immigrants, they thought of teaching as being a real profession. However they did it, they were conscientious. They worked hard. They didn't stay much after 3, but when they were there, they did what they had to do. And they knew a lot about how to maintain order. Each of them had something they were outstanding for--one played piano for assembly, one did this, one did that. My neighbor across the hall during my baptismal year there as a regular sub--she taught 6th grade--she and her kids made felt beanies, which they would wear to identify themselves as being Mrs. Schneider's 6th grade class! All those things sort of had meaning for me. It gave me a sense that you had to build your program. I mean, none of it was articulated. I think the extension of that for me was that I started doing plays, and I even learned how to read Shakespeare with these kids, some of whom were very difficult.

AT: Who were the kids?

AS: Well, they rotated. They did leveled classes, and they rotated. The first year, I had the 4-2 class. There were 10 or 12 classes on the grade, 4th grade. And I had the 2 class, because the teacher who was supposed to take that class got pregnant over the summer and was not coming back, and the secretary called me, because I'd been subbing there for quite a while. The secretary called me and said, "Alice, come and take this job if you want a permanent sub job, because it's a really good class." So I did. The neighborhood was then still racially and ethnically mixed: German and Irish families, Italians, Jews, Jamaicans—families that were part of that original East Tremont immigrant population. It was sort of a cohesive neighborhood. The East Tremont Y was still active. It wasn't a benign place by any means. Some of the people were obviously politically aware. And we found that out when the 1968 strike came. I had only inklings of it then because I myself wasn't political.

AT: But the tide was sort of ebbing.

AS: The tide was ebbing. It was very overcrowded. People were moving to the suburbs. And more than that, what really destroyed the neighborhood was the development of Co-op City to the northeast. It drew off a big chunk of our population, ... mostly whites. Italians. Some Germans. The Irish families. And whatever Jewish families there were. But also some Caribbean blacks. Mostly all moved to Co-op City. And what was left were these—many of them—apartments that were in, not terrible shape, but not great apartments that were then taken by many Latino, mostly Puerto Rican, families. And the general deterioration, because of overcrowding, and I don't know what all the other factors were, began to take its toll on whatever cohesion had existed.

AT: But you didn't get any special prepping for those sociological changes?

AS: Oh, no. We just saw what was happening. But I did get a lot of help from colleagues. They would show me lesson plans, they would give me ideas, and they would occasionally take a youngster I couldn't control, who was totally crazed. They would just sort of pass by and say hello.

AT: What was provided for children having difficulty?

AS: The classes were leveled, which meant that with the most difficult kids, you had a smaller class. It was called the "opportunity class." The most difficult kids were grouped together, and I think the maximum number was 12. And each teacher on the grade had to rotate having that class, and each of us eventually got—I mean it was once every 12 years, or whatever, but when you got there, you got there. And I had that class--maybe four or five years into the time there. And because the school was so overcrowded and because they had to be self-contained, I got a room that had been the assistant principal's office. Which when I think about it now takes my breath away. I must have had about 10 kids who were *crazy*! I mean they really were. Totally nuts! In this room that was smaller than the space we're in now, with tables and chairs. That was probably the hardest year I ever had because I couldn't do anything with them. And they couldn't do anything with me. And some of them were very--the few of them that I remember--just very sad little girls who didn't speak English very well. Didn't know what they were doing, just sort of lost in the shuffle, feeling empty, abandoned. And I would make games and do things. Did a lot of singing. That was the year of singing. Most of them didn't sing, but I did. And clapping, and ... it was awful.

AT: Were there any resources to support your development?

AS: No. No. Nowhere. I was reading stuff. It started with *Instructor* magazine, but then I took a subscription to *The Reading Teacher*, as well, and something else.

AT: Professional literature.

AS: Yes.

AT: Stuff that supported standardizing.

AS: Well, it was ideas. I mean, I didn't have any other source for them, except the neighboring teachers. One of them did come to me, actually, and showed me how to group for reading. I remember a funny thing about that. We had gotten these readers. Not Scott Foresman, but some other publisher. And they did parallel

editions. One was harder and one was easier. But they were the same illustrations, the same stories, and they were supposed to fool the kids into thinking they were reading the same book, when the kids all knew who got the dummy book and who got the regular book. It was some kind of system for organizing the kids into brackets: fast, slow, medium. And so there'd be one teacher on the 4th grade sent for training, I guess something arranged by the publisher, and then she'd come back and show the rest of us how to do it. You had to put them in rows ... but they were a new set of books, more or less, and they had ditto sheets so you could teach the lesson and hand out the ditto sheets. As far as I remember, that was the method of assimilating pedagogical information during those years.

AT: This is the mid-'60s or so.

AS: Right. I had to take a master's for the salary differential. A master's or 30 extra credits qualified me for a salary differential. By that time I had acquired a permanent license. That's when I decided to go to City College. And that's when I came into contact with Miriam Dorn, for one, who was completely memorable, and through Miriam, with Lillian Weber.

AT: Had you heard about either of these women before?

AS: Not much, not much, no. But I had read John Dewey in my undergraduate courses and they were enlarging on Dewey's thinking. I thought we should all be exposed to Dewey's philosophy whether or not we were going to do anything with it.

AT: You mean exposed in education courses.

AS: Ed courses, yes; in the undergraduate ed courses. What Dewey had written was really important to me. It seemed to me to be sort of the ideal. He wasn't very specific, but whatever he did say, and whatever I took from it, I knew this is the way it's supposed to be. Kids are supposed to weave and plant seeds and recognize themselves as active members of a democratic community.

AT: You were taken by this idea.

AS: I took it in as something that I knew.

AT: It was something you felt you could do.

AS: I didn't know how to do it, but I felt I could certainly try. I think doing plays was one aspect of that. And I did that quite well every year for quite some time. I did Gilbert & Sullivan comedies.

AT: In reaching for the ideal, you had ideas of your own that you wanted to act on.

AS: Yes. And the musicals were fun. After Gilbert & Sullivan I did something else, but I don't remember what it was

AT: In this general period, early- to mid-'60s, can you recall discussion about the schools beyond the professional realm? Anything interesting happening anywhere that affected you? New ideas? Old ideas dressed up as new?

AS: There was a movement called nongraded primary. It was based on the educational theories of John Goodlad and somebody else. The idea, as I remember it, was that if you just mixed kids together in different grades, you were somehow going to provide a much deeper educational experience for them. It was a way to break down the rigidity of age-grade, which didn't make sense anyway, according to these guys. And my principal signed us up for the training. She volunteered five of us. Reba Mayor was the *maven* at a school in Queens.

AT: When was the training given? After school?

AS: After school, yeah. And she asked me to be the coordinator of that thing, so I was taken out of the classroom. We recruited four or five of the newer teachers who were interested. Mostly beginning teachers. Some had had a year. I'd been teaching seven, eight years by then. And we went to Reba to get trained. They gave us stuff to read and stuff to do: examples of how to group kids and how to broaden the curriculum and stuff like that. It was certainly a different way of thinking about classrooms. We had to think up--that was my job--we had to think up activities for kids to do because there was going to be a lot of grouping, with only one adult in each

classroom. We didn't have paraprofessionals yet. We had to figure out what the other kids could do when they were sitting around waiting for the teacher to come to them! It was quite challenging... but interesting. It also meant that we had to meet together to figure things out. As far as I remember, we started with k's and l's, or maybe k and l, and l and 2. It was mixed—bimodal, mixed aged. Maybe we went as far as 3rd grade afterwards, but I remember the little kids. It was activities for the little kids that were different for me because I had only done stuff for the older children. All that handicraft and felt sewing material I had came in very handy! And pasting. I mean, little kids love to paste. So I would set up these things for them to do, and the teachers were very interested. I think we got paid for the monthly meeting in Queens, but not for meeting together. I have an idea that we got compensatory time for that. The principal worked out something where all the kids would go to the gym or auditorium or something so that the five of us could meet.

AT: The teachers union wasn't involved in these arrangements, I take it? The union's issues weren't large at this point?

AS: Not for us. We were a little subgroup inside this huge school. We had to do a certain amount of parent outreach. Not as much as we did later when we started open classroom, but you had to write letters to parents and talk to them in the schoolyard and all that stuff. One big appeal of our program for parents was full-time kindergarten. It wasn't long before we had a long waiting list.

AT: That was something new for parents, being courted like that.

AS: It was fairly new. Because up until then the only parent meeting was the official parent night. And that was only once a term, when everybody came and you had time only to say hello and then goodbye.

AT: How was it having to work more intimately with parents?

AS: It was fine. The outreach part was fine.

AT: It made sense to you.

AS: Oh, it surely made sense. But it had so much not been part of any school connection, even after I was teaching and my own children were in PS 28. It never occurred—I mean, they were never a problem—never occurred to me to go into school and talk to the teachers to find out how my kids were doing, except for that official parent night.

AT: So piece by piece change took hold.

AS: Piece by piece it happened. It was a patchwork, but it got patched together. And then that set-up for the nongraded primary became the foundation for the open classroom, because a number of the teachers--oh, and then came--when was the big lay-off? I can't seem to keep the chronology from bunching up in my mind. Because of a budget crunch, a number of teachers who had signed up for nongraded primary were laid off, and that program fell apart. And what was left of it became the nucleus of the open classroom program.

AT: The big layoff was '74, '75. You're jumping ahead. Let's go back a bit. In 1968, you were doing graduate work in child development with Miriam Dorn at CCNY?

AS: Right.

AT: And Miriam Dorn invited—

AS: Lillian.

AT: Lillian Weber was just getting started herself.

AS: Right.

AT: And you knew something about what Lillian was doing.

AS: Yes. We had read—maybe it came from Miriam—we had read some article about 'open education.' It was not a scholarly article at all, but it resonated. "Gee," we said, "this sounds pretty interesting." It was like what we were doing, only more so. And I wanted to keep what was left of that original thing together as best I could. Edythe Gaines had just become superintendent of our district. And Earl Kurtz, someone I knew from the time I started subbing, was for some years now principal of 92. I went to Earl and said, "Oh, here's an idea of something we want to do.

We'd like to put together a Parent Room, a place where parents could come and sit, and meet each other, and talk together talk about their kids. A hangout space." I also proposed getting a stove installed in that room so that parents could do cooking with kids and with each other. And Earl persuaded Edythe Gaines to pay for all of it: the room, the facilities, a parent coordinator. I guess by that time paraprofessionals had been introduced into classrooms because the woman who did the parent coordinating was one of the paras, Mrs. Thrower. She was the parent of one of the kids in our program.

You know what else was part of this? The '68 UFT strike. I was chapter chair, and we walked out. The school was shut down. But we kept very good relations with the parents, who then came and opened the school and went to sit-ins and sleep-ins and all of that. There was no hostility, at all. We would greet the parents in the morning with our picket signs, and they would greet us. They would go off, and we would march around. And that was, I think, a very important aspect of the conflict in our part of the city, because there was none of the rage and hostility that they experienced in some other places. That may well have been because we had always been, at least me and the other teachers who were part of the nongraded program, sort of sympathetic to parents. The teachers who were very adamant showed up at the picket line, but they were not hostile. It wasn't like they were yelling and screaming at the parents who came in. There was a certain degree of civility.

AT: Who was the common foe in this?

AS: We didn't have one. There was a local Presbyterian minister who sort of organized the parents, made himself responsible for the parents who were...

AT: Weren't both parties antagonistic toward the system as it stood?

AS: The teachers, for a variety of reasons, felt threatened by what was going on in Ocean Hill-Brownsville in Brooklyn. Understandably. I was a staunch unionist, and I still am. And that felt not good. On the other hand, what was going on in Brooklyn felt distant from what was going on at our school, which

was immense overcrowding, immense teacher shortage, immense shortage of materials and supplies and books and things. That was a legitimate grievance against that system. And we had that in common with the parents. So while we were protesting this, we were at the same time saying--and I think that was understood by both sides--that this was a chance to say to the board, "This is not okay."

AT: And it was during this time, at City, that Lillian Weber was invited to speak to the class you were in?

AS: If it was not at that time, it was shortly after or just before. But it was part of my own enlightenment and education, her speaking. I thought the things that she had to say were terrific. It must have been just after she came back from England because she didn't have the Workshop Center yet. But she had books and things, and we could borrow those. And the following semester, when I took her class, I borrowed them and shared them with the folks on our staff. That was our introduction to "open education". And we were doing it at that point...

AT: Doing this *thing*.

AS: Open education was more than just a catchy name. It was small group teaching, it was hands-on teaching, it was observing kids and trying to figure out the best way to enrich their world for them. It was making what you were doing with kids make sense. And it was integrated in every way we could think: intellectually, socially, economically, and age-wise. It was our attempt to sort of do all that.

AT: It sounds like a full plate.

AS: Well, it was very interesting. And it was something we were doing together. I knew a little more than the other teachers who had volunteered for the program, but not a whole lot. It was not my expertise. Lillian had already started her Corridor program, which provided intensive support for staff development, but she couldn't let us join because she was already working in as many schools as she could handle at that point. She suggested we contact a couple of young educators, Ann Cook and Herb Mack. Ann and Herb had just received a huge Ford Foundation grant, like a half million, to start a

teachers' center, which they were calling the Community Resources Institute (CRI). They were holding workshops in their apartment at the time. Their proposal to Ford was about creating opportunities for more child-centered classrooms with training from experienced people from England, such as Wendla Kernig and Moira McKenzie, two headmistresses of schools in London. Also some teachers from Wendla's school, and an English primary school teacher named Ellen Blance. Anne and Herb themselves, who were from Chicago, had been in England for several years, working in various jobs for the Schools Council. So when Lillian said, "Call them," I called--we were the first school to sign up for what they were doing--and they contacted Gaines, who agreed on the spot to help underwrite their help of teachers in her district. Gaines had been principal at Joan of Arc junior high school on the West Side of Manhattan, where Lillian was already working, so this was all interconnected, all part of that same movement to get fresh thinking into the system, although I didn't know the other pieces at the time.

AT: You were innocent of the political tumult being generated.

AS: Absolutely. And not terrifically interested.

AT: What were Herb and Ann's workshops about?

AS: That first year we did something on baking because Ann was a tremendous cook, and baking was one of her favorite things. And at school, since we had that oven, and Mrs. Thrower, in the Parent Room, we could have groups of kids work with Mrs. Thrower doing baking during the course of the morning. And then the second year, we graduated to having our own little post office, which we could use for cooking in the classroom. And cooking in the classroom--on hot plates--became a very important thing. The workshops were not just cooking, but rather about thinking through how do you do this in the classroom? What does it mean? What value is it? How does it connect up with all the rest of the curriculum? And how to explain it to parents, how to get parents to participate, to volunteer in the classroom, to come and help with the cooking. All those implications. We did literacy things, too. We did reading, making books. That really expanded after Wendla (Kernig) came.

AT: You had said earlier that when you were in Miriam Dorn's class, you were part of a group of people who would meet for reading.

AS: I think it was after the course was over. We met together a couple of times. We met at people's houses-- we met at Miriam's house, we met at my house, and we met at somebody else's house.

AT: To do what?

AS: To continue talking about teaching and learning. To explore shared interests. It was as if what we had done in our classes needed to be re-examined. It was just ideas that were around that we were interested in and that we needed to explore further. And somewhere in there we did tri-wall construction, which was emblematic of that time. I thought it was real funny that all of us were building tri-wall furniture. I'm not sure whether we did that in somebody's house. I don't remember its chronology.

AT: Did you ever go to Floyd Page's studio in lower Manhattan?

AS: Oh, maybe that's what we did. Yeah, yeah, yeah. He was the one who had those milk crates as a divider in his studio. He was part of EDC. Yes, we did go there once, but I don't know whether it was at this time or a year later. But yes, that was part of it. We were sort of in the forefront. Not the forefront, but--

AT: Who else was "we?"

AS: Oh my gosh. Jerry Kirschenbaum, Carol Howard, Cynthia ...? Pam Cushing, and the woman who was her partner, whose name I now don't remember, but Pam, and Pearl Filson. And after the second or third year of the program some of the teachers in the regular school wanted to join. So they became part of what we were doing—we expanded a little bit to 3rd grade, 4th grade, and then 5th/6th grade. Jerry Kirschenbaum was the 5th/6th grade teacher, together with somebody else.

And then came the English contingent that Ann and Herb organized. Getting grant money to bring Wendla Kernig to New York was a brainstorm. Wendla did something that I had never seen before: she came into

the classroom and set it up. We watched (chuckle) slightly stunned by what we saw her do with the materials at hand and with the space, and tried to do it ourselves with areas and things, and with whatever literature we had. Actually, now that I think of it, I think she came after the semester had started the very first time, and she used one classroom as a model classroom, and she set it up; I helped. And then she ran it, which was, I've got to tell you, a virtuoso act; because here is this big English lady, very English, with la-di-da in her speech, although she wasn't a la-di-da person, and all these little children, and they varied in their ethnicities. She got them going to the point where you would think that this class had been together for 10 years. I mean, the kids came and went. Then I did it for the summer: a teacher training thing. I was Wendla's assistant. That was my real training, those two summers. A real training after 12 years, in that, first of all, it was like a master class with a great artist. She was so competent and so knowledgeable. There wasn't a whole lot of theoretical stuff. I mean, we were not doing pedagogical analysis there. We were doing fundamentals. "This is what you do." And then sitting down and thinking about what the kids did, and how they did it, and what we could change, what we should change--all that. But the thinking was not before the fact. In the morning, she talked about setting up. Always. And so we would come in, in the morning, and set up and she'd say, "Well today I think we'll baathe the babies," and she'd bring in a tub of water and tear the clothes off the dolls. So when the kids came in after morning meeting, she'd say, "Now, today, we must baathe the babies. Jasmine, why don't you and Gloria baathe the babies." And Jasmine and Gloria would have a wonderful time scrubbing the babies. And she did stuff like that, which was exemplary. This was an early childhood classroom. These were little kids. For some of them, it was their first school experience. I mean, they were kindergartners. She wanted them to have fun, clearly. She wanted them to do familiar things and to feel easy about it, and she wanted them to learn their way around the classroom. She wanted them to develop independence and use their own ideas and experiences and insights. She wanted them to read labels: so after baathing the babies, she would sometimes put a chart up and say, "Yesterday we baathed the babies." But it wasn't an "experience" chart. It wasn't everybody

sitting around in a circle and dictating. That came much later from other experts, but she would just sort of informally do these things, talk to kids, talk to parents, tell them what we did. "Go home and tell mummy that we baathed the babies today." They would take home stuff that they baked and sometimes talk about it, and then the parents would say, "Oh, Jasmine made cookies today." Art was a very big activity. And we had done very little of it in classrooms up until then, even in the primary classroom. But once we started--especially if it was Wendla—it had to be paints and easels and art supplies and papers and different kinds of paper and wallpaper and brown paper and white paper and crayons and markers and all sorts of things. And we had to set up an art area. And then we had to figure out how it was going to be possible for two or three kids to paint without painting each other! To paint on the paper more or less. And figure out what we needed to do and where, and how we had to intervene, and how to set it up, and how to clean it up, and how to include the kids in all those processes. It was an endless activity, and every time we did it, all the paint spilled, and we would have to talk about how that could happen? And how could it be avoided the next time? It was exhausting, but it was energizing. It kept the teachers just very engaged with the whole thing, even though it was so hard. And then we had a talk about what was the value of this. I mean, the kids were surely having fun, no question about that, but what did it all mean and how is it engaging them and what was it teaching and what were they learning and why was it important? Why did it matter? She came back twice. She came in the fall, and she came in the spring. And then in the summer, maybe the summer of '72, we did a workshop. Because by then Wendla had worked with teachers at other schools. We now had a group of teachers from different schools who wanted to sign up for the summer workshop. And by that time, the CRI office had opened. Groups of teachers came to 92 to observe in the classroom that Wendla and I ran in the mornings. And then in the afternoons we all gathered back at CRI and talked, and evaluated, and did more work, whatever. And we met in that way, I think, for at least two, maybe three, summers. And parents were invited to come to some of the workshops and some of the morning visits. We didn't do the kind of observation and documentation that Pat Carini

initiated; that came somewhat later. It was that technique of a page for each kid and then you'd jot down at the end of the morning what you saw them do and all that. And that was okay. Until recently, I had some of the notebooks that I kept on kids. I don't know what I did with them.

AT: In a sense, as a teacher, you were becoming an artist yourself.

AS: I don't know if I was such an artist as a teacher. I think I simply learned to be a teacher. I think people like Wendla just knew how to do it, in the same way that some people just know how to play the violin. At the time, she was probably in her 50s; maybe late 40s. She had started out as a nursery helper; I don't think she had any particular training when she started. She came to England from Germany, a refugee, but I don't know at what age. Somehow they figured out how to train her and appointed her as a head mistress. She knew how to do this for sure. I don't think of myself as being an inspired teacher in the same way. But I learned and I was very motivated because it was interesting: intellectually interesting and challenging. And I think that's why when Pat Carini came along as another source of ideas about how to do it, how to understand it, how to interpret what you're seeing and experiencing with kids, I was just ripe for that.

AT: How did it happen that Pat Carini came along?

AS: What happened was when I was still at PS 92, a group from the Educational Testing Service (ETS), Ted Chittenden, Marianne Amarel and Ann Bussis, visited us. They were doing this early childhood research, which the Ford Foundation was funding. I think they were hired originally to do some kind of evaluation of the Educational Development Corporation (EDC). And that work morphed into a broader assessment of open education. Something like that. And somewhere along the way they got connected to Herb (Mack) and Ann (Cook). Maybe through Lillian (Weber). And Herb and Ann directed them to us (at 92). They were looking for teachers who'd be willing to collaborate with them on a study of children as beginning readers. And we thought that would be sort of interesting to do. Eventually what they were doing would develop into a big reading study that they finally published in 1985: *Inquiry into*

meaning, An investigation of learning to read (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates). But in that first stage they were still developing processes for how and what to observe and all of that. And that is where Pat Carini came in. Pat's work at the Prospect School in North Bennington, Vt., which I think she had begun in the mid-'60s, was becoming known to a larger circle of educators. Ted *et al.* had gotten interested in some of the ideas she had about observation and documentation and sought her help in developing a kind of format for the feedback they were hoping to collect. So that summer, early '70s, they brought groups of us up to Prospect--groups of teachers from various schools who had agreed to work with them--for three- or five-day meetings. I forget which. In our group, it was me, Pam Cushing and Leslie Stein, a few of us. And teachers from other schools. Jackie Ancess, who was a teacher at a Bronx middle school, was another CRI person involved that summer. We all went up there and listened to Pat. I think it was not the first time I had seen her. I think the first time was at one of the first Catherine Maloney Memorial Lectures at the Workshop Center at City College. We weren't regular attendees at the Center because we had CRI as our principal staff development support, but we got the Center's schedule and we would occasionally go to big meetings there. I think that was where I first heard Vito (Perrone) speak, even before the North Dakota Study Group formed. We ourselves didn't become part of the NDSG until maybe the 4th or 5th year of its existence. But we went up to Prospect for that first reading-study meeting, or whatever it was, and met the staff. Jessica Howard was very much part of it. And talked about reading and literacy and observation and documentation and that stuff.

AT: Was this *the* Summer Institute?

AS: It wasn't yet Summer Institute. Well, maybe it was a summer institute. What we were doing ran parallel to the other Summer Institute, which was a six-week course that Pat conducted. I think Beth Alberty, who was with the Workshop Center, was in that six-week session, as well as Virginia Kramer from PS 75 (in Manhattan). It was like a parallel universe, and we would see them because they had to read all these notes. The Prospect staff had already collected all this

documentation on students' work: tons and tons of artwork and writing and all of that going back 10 years. An archive had been established and it was being used as the basis of staff development. They used processes that Pat had developed to sort of study the work—discuss it, describe it, analyze it. We were learning how to look at children's work, too, although in a much less intensive way. But we got to look at the file they were working with--I think it was only one student's work: the famous Virginia, one of Prospect's early students on whom they had a great deal of material. It was my first experience of delving into that archive—and it was a stunner. I just loved it! The processes for observing and documenting learning that Prospect exposed us to took our understanding to a much deeper level and became another very important part of how we evaluated children's learning across the board.

AT: Did you then start collecting children's work at 92?

AS: We made a stab at it, but first of all we didn't know what we were doing. We lacked Prospect's wherewithal: their facilities, their space; and we didn't have a person to sort of coordinate it. I might have been able to do it when I was out of the classroom. When we shifted to open classroom, which was maybe the last two years I was at 92, I went back to being a classroom teacher. I felt I could be more useful in the classroom--more useful to myself. The job of coordinator of the nongraded primary program at 92 turned out to be not so essential. I ended up largely running things off on the Xerox machine, which other people could do just as well. I wanted to be back in the classroom, trying things out on my own kids. That's what I was doing when Leslie Stein learned through Ann and Herb that Debbie Meier had already started a small school within a school in District 5 (East Harlem), called Central Park East, with Vivian Wallace and Howie Budin, and whoever those two or three other people were who started the school with them.

We'd met Debbie a couple of times at conferences at the Workshop Center. She once came to see our program at 92. She had started CPE with the idea of growing it gradually, adding lower grade classes and upper grade classes until its projected organization

was achieved. That year she was looking for a 1st/2nd grade early childhood teacher and Leslie took the job. But Debbie also let us know that there'd be openings in the school year following.

We didn't get very far into collecting children's work while I was still at 92, but the reading study continued. We'd meet periodically--to look at samples of the running records we started keeping, originally at Prospect and then at ETS in Princeton, NJ . We looked at them collectively: interpreted them, studied them, and tried to figure out what was going on.

(Part 2)

AT: So there were these terrible budget cuts in the city...'75?

AS: Somewhere like that.

AT: There was an abrupt deterioration in the 'economic climate' and it had a deleterious affect on local education programs. The city declared bankruptcy, deep cuts were made in the school budget, 18,000 teachers were fired and many others were moved around the school system.

AS: What happened throughout the system was that the younger teachers were laid off, the ones with the least seniority. There was all that shuffling around. In my program at 92 in the Bronx two or three people were laid off and replaced by people who had more seniority, a couple of whom didn't know what we were doing in our program, and didn't care. They came on board because it was a job, pure and simple, not because they were particularly interested in children's development. And we had worked so hard to build this thing, the collegiality, the corridor, the family room, all that stuff. It was dreadful. I just felt, as I think of it now, it was so unfair. The program wasn't decimated exactly, but it didn't have the same vitality.

Throughout the rest of that school year and the following school year (1976-'77), being at 92 just felt progressively not satisfying. We were used to a certain kind of community activity and it was no longer possible.

AT: Who was 'we'?

AS: Pam Cushing and I. Pam was one of the kindergarten teachers, and we were very close. Debbie had made it clear to both of us there'd be openings at CPE if we decided to move. I don't know how Pam felt, but frankly I didn't want to start all over again with another group. I wanted to step into something where I could actually teach. Not do so much organizing and parent outreach: writing notes and sending letters, and all that kind of stuff.

AT: Pam Cushing, as I recall, was remembered by her colleagues at CPE as a particularly good teacher.

AS: Oh, she was wonderful! She was a new teacher when she came to 92 , but she became a great teacher.

AT: What made her so terrific?

AS: Oh, at that time, she was quite a traditional teacher. She was a kindergarten teacher, so she knew about kindergarten things. But she was very lively and very energetic and very open to ideas and suggestions, and she loved the idea that kids could mush around in paint as much as they wanted, which is what CPE provided for. That was a new idea for us because the original thing was you put out four pieces of paper and some glue and showed the kids where to glue it down, and all of that. All this new stuff we were coming in contact with was just very electrifying, and Pam particularly was taken with that.

AT: You didn't have to leave 92?

AS: I just decided that it was time to go. I felt badly about it; I had been in the neighborhood so long. But they had somebody to replace me and sort of sustain the program. Here was a chance to really try things out. It was going to be a small program in a larger school. Which is what the non-graded primary had been, but 92 had something like 2,000 students, it was huge. Here was an opportunity to move and work with Deborah, who even then had something of a reputation. She was a thinker and articulate. She'd been an advisor in Lillian's program. She was connected to Herb and Ann's Community Resources Institute, as well. And she was very stimulating to work with. She gave you lots of room to try things out.

Pam and I moved to Central Park East and became part of what was really and truly a community of—I mean, we didn't know it then; we didn't call it that—but we became a community of teachers. Leslie Stein, who had also connected to Ann and Herb. Vivian Wallace, someone we knew from 92, was already there, because Vivian and Debbie knew each other from the Workshop Center, I think. Who else was there?

AT: Bruce Kanze?

AS: Bruce came the following year, or two years later.

AT: Carol Mulligan?

AS: Carol Mulligan, right. She was already there, I think. Oh, Susan Soller; was she there or did she come later? And Digna Galarza, of course. I don't want to forget Digna. She was from the neighborhood. She was a school aide, assigned to Debbie's program, and with it beyond even my long tenure. We were in that building on 103rd Street in East Harlem, just east of Central Park. One of those big old school buildings built to look like Oxford. We shared it with two other schools. Or three. I can't remember. The complex was conceived under Tony Alvarado's tenure, a year or so after he took over as superintendent for District 6 (East Harlem). He promised that he would support anybody who came to him with an original vital idea for a school and he would help them get it started. And Debbie was one of the people who'd volunteered.

AS: We still had CRI as a source, sort of, of continuing education.

AT: What was that about?

AS: That was about coming together to do hands-on stuff. We did that all the time. And eventually I think, what happened was that CRI gradually moved into the junior high/ high school thing. They got interested in the older kids. Herb's experience had been with older kids anyway. So then we went to the Workshop Center and did workshops with Stan Chu and Henny Wong and those folks. We made that transition. And then after a while I don't think we needed to do that quite so much because the staff was pretty well fixed. We had our ideas in place. We sort of knew what we were

doing. For me, the Prospect Summer Institute became the place where I could explore more philosophical implications.

AT: Before we go further, I want to go back for minute to that first summer at the Prospect School. The school had developed these portfolios...

AS: Yes. We didn't call them "portfolios;" we called them "files."

AT: Files. And in this file you were looking at...?

AS: The file was actually a big portfolio of the work of this student, starting from when she began at Prospect at age, I guess she was like 4½, and the teachers--I think the only teacher then was probably Jessica Howard--had collected this child's work over the course of the year. In Pat Carini's telling, Prospect started as a nursery school for the children of three families. One mother took on the role of the teacher, one mother kept the books and did all of that, and then there was Pat, the third parent, and she didn't exactly know what her job was, so she went around cleaning classrooms, and picking up stray papers and whatever, and that's how the archives started, because she would just pick up all the stuff that kids didn't take home and started saving it. All that work was collected and put into this big folder, and when Jessica wrote a progress report to the family she would make reference to the art that Virginia had done and some of her language and what she had observed of her play and all of that. So that summer we looked at the artwork and we used this descriptive process that Pat--who had studied at Clark University, and trained as a psychologist--had developed for looking at art. And we looked at--well, it wasn't really writing then. But a year or two later when there was writing--when that particular kid had become a huge writer--we looked at the writing. Which was another kind of descriptive process that was very like close reading. We looked at the teacher records that Jessica had kept for the whole year on this particular child. And in the early days they also had a lot of photographs and other stuff that were part of the record of that particular kid.

The important thing for us, at Prospect, was we learned the importance of children's work, and ways of looking at it that weren't just sort of airy-fairy, you

know, wispy ... This was description; observation and description, based on the work and not a whole lot of theoretical stuff; not a lot of Freudian stuff. And the exciting part of it was that looking at the work done--I don't want to use artsy-fartsy language—you can see the kid's inner self, the spirit and the things that really intrigued her and interested her—you can see it developing over the years, and that is stunning. That just knocks you out when you see it happening. And so that very first time I got hooked, and I didn't stop being hooked ever.

AT: How did getting *hooked*, taken over so, affect the relationships you had with your own children at that time?

AS: Well, they were older by then. And I think that was terrifically important. If I had had little kids to worry about, I don't think I could have spent as much time as this took to do: teaching, collecting work, looking at work, planning and revising curriculum, and all of that. It took an **enormous** amount of time. I wouldn't have been able to do that if I'd had them underfoot. That wouldn't have been possible.

AT: By this point, you've moved to Central Park East. You've made the transition.

AS: Yes.. And we started doing some of the Prospect processes there, looking at our kids' work. Looking at writing, looking at...

AT: Had everybody on the staff gone to Prospect that summer?

AS: No, not everybody. Leslie, Pam, Vivian and I were in that first group, but let me say this... Leslie, Pam, and Vivian were younger, and after the first year or two, they all had little kids. They had babies, and so it wasn't quite as easy for them to spend as much time, because we would have staff meetings every week at CPE, every Monday, and usually a two-to-two and a half hour meeting. And we mostly looked at kids' work or we talked about curriculum issues or Debbie spoke about something. But that time together was very important, so people had to do that. And some of us did it more than others. We always stayed late at school. Got there early, stayed late. That was standard. And when Donny Rotkin came on staff that mental

time-on task grew even longer. Donny lived only a few blocks from me in Brooklyn and for years every day of the school week we would drive to and from school together, mostly talking about school and kids and curriculum, and all of that. Which was another way of our learning and teaching each other. And after a while, we even shared kids, because he taught lower grades and I had upper grades, and I'd get the kids that he had worked with.

AT: Were these kids different in any way from the kids you'd worked with in the Bronx?

AS: Oh, yes.

AT: It wasn't just your new insights?

AS: No, no. The kids were very different. In the very early years at 92 there were still a few white families, but by the time we started the nongraded primary program they were all gone. But because parents had to agree to allow their kids to enroll in the program, I think we probably just by that process alone attracted parents who were a little more aware of school and what it was. It wasn't that they were ardent progressives by any means, but they at least sensed that we were paying a lot of attention to their kids and talking about them and worrying about them. And then we had that parent room where they could all come and collect, and cook, and drink coffee, and talk to each other, which was a big draw. But they were mostly black and latino, working class and poor, with a number of extremely troubled, troubled kids. At Central Park East, we had lots of local kids who were black and latino and poor, and many of them were troubled, but we also had sort of working class upwardly mobile families. So the mix there was different from the Bronx.

AT: Middle class.

AS: Can't call it...well, the low end of the middle class.

AT: The striving class.

AS: Striving, very much so. Several of our families moved to Englewood, NJ, and bought houses there after their children finished CPE, that level of really striving, and very much concerned. Some of the

mothers became paraprofessionals once their kids were in school. And a number of the fathers were sort of--because they were local men--they volunteered and did things and helped with school projects. When we had furniture painting parties and all of that, they would volunteer. My friend, Pam, became very close to one of the families, the DeJesus family, because Pam's husband died when Alexander was just born. He wasn't even a year old, I think. It was a terrible time for her, obviously; she had this infant, her husband was dying, but she also needed to work. The DeJesus family lived in the projects right across the street. And they had four or five kids of their own. Sylvia DeJesus became the caregiver for Alexander. Alexander became part of that family. And Papo, their father, became Papo for Alexander. It was just such an important relationship because they were just there, and they were loving, kind, careful. Digna was another one who did childcare and babysitting and all sorts of things. Another one of the parents was the caregiver for Vivian Wallace's older boy, Benjamin. So we had that kind of relationship with the families and the neighborhood.

AT: It was an amazing kind of growth. A real model of how an urban school might be in a neighborhood of need.

AS: Well, it was a neighborhood of need; but also, I must say, a neighborhood where so many of the parents were such loving people, you know? You really sensed that. They really cared about their kids, they cared about us. They wanted the school to be—I mean, it wasn't by any means a perfect fit. Plenty of people got mad and ran to the district office to complain, and that was Debbie's department. She dealt with them. But many of them were really nice people. And then we got, for awhile, which made for a very interesting mix, kids from Roosevelt Island.

AT: A year later, two years?

AS: A couple of years later. We were established and underway.

AT: You liked what was happening to your teaching.

AS: I liked what was happening to my teaching because I had regular opportunities to think about it

for myself, to think about it with the people I was teaching with, to think about it with Debbie, and then we had to write these school reports, narrative school reports. And it was a terrible job to have to undertake. I mean, it was really awful--weeks and weeks. But I looked at kids' work and I thought about kids' work, and that was what I based my school reports on. So, hateful though they were to do, they were very important. And then Debbie read them.

AT: Reports for the parents?

AS: For the parents, yeah. Anyway Roosevelt Island opened at some point, and they didn't have a school. And because we were relatively close, across the East River, for a year or two we got an influx of these middle class kids. Suddenly, sort of. And they were quite a different population. Not many of them. Not enough to be significant, but interesting. I guess by that time we had developed some reputation. I mean, Debbie hadn't gotten the McArthur Award yet, but people were sort of saying, Okay, look, their reading scores are not off the charts, but they sent all these reports and they had these—oh, and then we had family conferences, which we got from—oh, wait. This is a very interesting connection. Arthur Maslow—was his name Arthur? The brother's name was something else: Abraham! He was that Abraham Maslow; but his brother, Arthur, was also a psychologist, and Susan Harmon, who was our school psychologist, heard Arthur speak at the Institute of Family Therapy about ways of communicating with parents: how to organize it, what you should talk about, how you can talk comfortably. And she persuaded him to come and look at our school and talk to us and do some workshop sessions with us at school about how to do this parent part of it more effectively. And so he did. He volunteered his time and he came to meetings and, I mean (chuckle)...

AT: Why are you laughing?

AS: Well, because he was quite a well-known professional. He had his own business, and he did therapy and all of that, and here he was, quite ready to come on a Wednesday after work and sit for two or two-and-a-half hours and talk to us about what we were wrestling with, and to do it once a month for a

year or so. I was very impressed with that. He was a very pleasant, kindly man.

AT: What did you get from him?

AS: We talked about all the things that you need to be aware of when you're talking with parents. And we instituted family conferences as a regular part of our school work. Instead of just parent meetings for 10 minutes--parent comes in, parent goes out, that's it, your kid is fine, good bye--we had family conferences where we spent time sitting with parents and talking about each parents' child. Both the parents and the child had to be there. It was a protocol that we developed with Maslow: how to do it, how to approach it, the kinds of difficulties that were likely to occur. Then as we started doing it, we would talk about what worked, what didn't work. And that became a standard part of our school practice. Occasionally, at least when Jane Andreis became head of the school, we made referrals of kids and families to them. As far as I know, the Institute of Family Therapy is still in business. I suddenly recall this very tall, wonderful African-American guy, whose name I can't remember, a psychologist at the Institute of Family Therapy, who they assigned to work at our school, like half a day a week or something, so kids and families could see him in the school building.

AT: In-school consults.

AS: Right. And some families continued seeing him at the Institute.

AT: This was what, a good 12 to 15 years after the school began?

AS: Yeah, right. Although the connection with Arthur happened fairly early, it needed that time to evolve.

AT: At that point, you are light years away from the woman with the shopping bag of handicrafts. Different ideas about kids' development and materials have come into play.

AS: Ideas about children's interests and materials. Those are the things that drew me in. I started to reflect on evidence. I don't want to say "evidence of learning," but just kids' development and what ideas

they were coming up with and how they were doing that and what signs there were of what I was doing that was exciting, interesting, sustaining. The other part of it that was very important was the fact that I got to do my own curriculum; I was not at all obliged to observe any mandates. Although I must say, during most of those years, if there was a mandated curriculum, it was so vague and general that it had no resonance. I mean, it was sort of Native Americans in 3rd grade, early New York in 4th grade; something like that, but nobody held you to it, and nobody cared if you did it or not, so I did most of my own curriculum, and I did the things that I liked. A lot of it was ancient history, because I loved ancient Greece. Always did. We read *The Iliad* and did stuff like that. I did 4th and 5th for a number of years and then 5th and 6th, or some combination. One year I did 4th, 5th, and 6th grade—that was very hard. But I did Shakespeare plays: I liked those. I wrote my own versions, and that became a chunk of the curriculum.

Actually, I started doing plays with kids even at PS 92, and that was so weird because the school didn't have a recessed stage. It was one of those old buildings that had something like a Shakespearean stage, with the proscenium sticking out into the audience. We used to scour the neighborhood for old refrigerator boxes to paint and make into scenery and stuff. It was wonderful fun. We did an interesting version of *Julius Caesar*, which I wrote myself (chuckle). They loved it when they got to 'stab' each other and play-blood spurted out from their 'wounds.' That was the best part.

At CPE, I did a play every year. And then Barry Solway, a music teacher from the upperWest Side, joined the staff somewhere in there and took over the dramatic part of CPE's program, which was fine. We kept adding pieces and expanding. Jane Andreis originally came in as the art teacher. And after we moved from 103rd Street to the building on 106th St. on Madison Av., the Jackie Robinson Complex, we had a different kind of space and facility. For awhile we were way upstairs, and then we were way downstairs. On each occasion we had different kinds of space to deal with, which was in some ways a mixed blessing because we were at some points very spread out. I think that had an effect on how we

interacted with each other and supported each other; and then at other times we were all crammed together in two corridors.

AT: Presumably those changes produced new questions, or did your work settle into routine?

AS: No, it never settled, although I must say quite honestly in the most recent years it was not nearly as probing and worrying. There's a lot of worrying. I mean, there wasn't so much questioning. Am I doing it right? Are they learning anything? These kids are still not able to read and I have been killing myself to get them to do it. What am I doing wrong? What am I doing right? That's sort of the *contra punctil* motif to everything--there is no assurance that I'm successful. I think that's standard for any teacher. And at some point it just got very—

AT: You were getting better as a teacher, but that still left you questions about whether it had impact on the kids.

AS: Yeah. Well, because, you know why? Because the conflict is always between should I believe these test results—I have to do the tests every year. I can't close my eyes to it; I can't deny it. I can say it's crap and I don't believe in it and it's worthless. On the other hand, that printout comes and I see those numbers, and I can't help but say, "Why didn't so and so get a higher score?" I can't help that. I mean, fortunately my own children did not present me with that dilemma, so I never had to worry about that. They got high test scores; that's enough. And also they were reading books, so I didn't have to worry about them.

AT: Those test scores have a big place in the culture.

AS: Absolutely, absolutely. No matter how much we talked about them and protected ourselves from them and protected the kids from them, they were undeniable. And now (in 2006) it's a zillion times worse. There's something about the appearance of that league table that you can't shed yourself of. No matter what. We have a tangled tie to those test scores. It is inevitable and inexorable.

We had wonderful press. Debbie was very successful with that. But we had to make the parents aware of the

fact that however their child or children did, in our judgment, there was also this other judgment: how to reconcile those two disparate realities, how to help parents continue to feel supportive and positive and strong about their kids, even those who are not doing well on the tests. That was an ongoing battle. I didn't want to justify failure or call it failure, because I had done the best I could. I didn't want to blame the kid, because it wasn't his or her fault. So we had to look for 'the evidence.' There was one study we commissioned, conducted by David Bensman of Rutgers, that came up with some wonderful stuff.

But also we heard from kids who grew up and went their own way. Let me tell you one story, about a kid named Miguel, who came to us as a very angry little boy. Very clumsy, fell all over himself, mad at everything--little kid. And when he got really mad (chuckle)—he had very big feet-- he would take off his sneakers and throw them at people. He was not academically very successful. His parents came dutifully to conferences. He was a late child; the parents had older, much older children, so they were a little impatient with him, I think that was part of it. Anyway, we kept him, we struggled with him, we went along with him, and he graduated at sixth grade. Last year I was at the museum, not the Frick, not the Met, maybe the Jewish Museum? One of the smaller museums—and a big guy comes over and says, "Alice!" Big, husky black guy: "Alice!" I said, "You must know me, but who are you?" "Miguel!" And he is a museum guard. I don't know, he must be 30 by now. But he's got a wife and he has a child and he's a museum guard: he has a life. I find that heartwarming; it makes me teary. I prefer that story to—We've also had our share of Harvard graduates and doctors and lawyers and all those wonderful guys. Vivian's older boy is a journalist and had a piece in the *New Yorker* a couple of months ago. We have those, but we expect those. For Miguel to have made a life for himself, it was just wonderful. Wonderful! There is another one who is now a doctor and somehow found Debbie and sent Debbie an e-mail, and then she forwarded it to me because I had him in 5th and 6th grade. So there are those bits of stories.

AT: So you worried about them because they had low test scores.

AS: They had low test scores and they were, academically, challenged.

AT: But the tests don't test for their humanity or their spirit.

AS: No. The tests don't test for what they can do or what they're going to be when they grow up. It would have been reassuring if Miguel had at least done okay. He did very poorly. But apparently it wasn't so poor, or something else might have happened in his life that made it possible for him to be literate enough to get a job in a museum as a museum guard. That means when they checked his life story, he hadn't had any bad run-ins with the police or debt collectors or anything, and he has a nice, big smile and he doesn't throw his shoes any more. So, in some ways, that's what it means to me to be successful in teaching. Was it me? Was it us? Who knows?

AT: I don't think you answered my question earlier about how you got good at your practice. Just in general, was it a matter of resolving certain questions, while the answers to other questions remained elusive. Was any of that part of the dynamic of your development?

AS: I don't think any of my questions were resolved (chuckle)! I don't know if you could resolve questions about teaching and learning!

AT: You stayed at Central Park East until—

AS: Three years ago when I retired.

AT: You put in about 20 years there.

AS: I worked there a little more than that, I think. '70—when did the school start? '75, I think, right? Or '76. Pam and I got there in '77-'78. So since then. I don't think questions about teaching and learning resolve. I can't think of them that way, because I can't think I came up with any answers. I came up with practice: let me try this, let me try that. When, in this new literacy thing, they came up with processes to help kids analyze stories and list the characters and all of that, maybe ten years ago, I found one of those things—an instruction booklet—which they sent from the district or whatever. I thought, "Oh, gee, this is interesting.

This is fun to try," and I did. And I liked it. So I did it. I did my own variations. That was not the resolution of a question, because the question is, "How do you really teach reading?" And I don't know the answer to that, but if there are things to do that might reveal something, then I do them. That was sort of an outgrowth of the work with Prospect, or a parallel thing, because some of the processes for studying children's development as readers came directly from some of Pat's work. We used some of those processes and then followed the practices. So there was three consecutive years of that, and that was enormously helpful to me as a way of thinking about how kids learn to read and what they read and how they read.

AT: So for about 15 years after you started teaching you were still being educated about teaching?

AS: Oh, yeah; oh, yeah.

AT: You weren't left to work in an isolated state.

AS: No, no.

AT: And that was very critical.

AS: That was essential. Essential. The communal nature of our work was really very important. Throughout it was always collective and shared, and that was enormous support.

AT: The general public looks at the test scores and has no notion of the collective effort that's being made, not only on behalf of their own kids, but on behalf of a larger meaning of our society. Where's the public for that?

AS: There were some. Who were they? Some were people from other places who came to visit our school. We had that: faculty from colleges, professional groups. There were some educators from Chicago or Evanston who were doing a study. They came and 'miked' us and we recorded ourselves for a whole day. Some group of education faculty. For what? I don't really remember. I didn't take it all very seriously. I think they were trying to learn what teaching practices there were in the course of a day in a school like ours. I think they thought that if they collected this raw data--all the things that I said and the interactions that

I had--they could make something of it. It wasn't for a whole day; it was probably for an hour at a time (chuckle). I'm exaggerating. But I went around and did what I did, and then they recorded it, and then they had transcriptions of it and then we talked about it: "What did you mean when you said this to so and so?" You know, it was like that. It was a project that extended over weeks. Oh, you know where I think we met them--at the North Dakota Study Group meeting. I think they were a group that Vito had invited, Vito Perrone.

AT: How did you come to be part of the North Dakota Study Group?

AS: At one point, I guess in the 3rd or 4th year of the group's existence, somebody at the annual meeting said, "How come there are so few teachers here?" So Debbie came back from that meeting and said, "You have to go next year; we all have to go." She was one of the group's originals. And so the next year a bunch of us went, of course.

AT: Was that meaningful to you?

AS: It was. It was always interesting, because then you met teachers from Minnesota and California and other faraway places. And Vito, of course, was just inspiring.

AT: Did being in that circle add in any significant way to your teaching practice? Or was it just intellectually stimulating?

AS: It was stimulating because it was such a diverse group of people. I can think of several people I met through the North Dakota Study Group who made the experience very important. One of them was Joe Suina, whose memoir of himself as a little kid on the Cochiti reservation in New Mexico I found very moving. I passed copies of that memoir around at family conferences and parent meetings. And then there was that whole period when somebody from a school in Santa Fe invited me to do an annual workshop there. That was done through the Matsushida Foundation, a philanthropy supporting educational innovation. I think they were just starting up, their first or second year, a Japanese-American foundation. Their orientation was progressive but not

passionately so. They just wanted to help schools get better and Santa Fe was one of several sites where they were working. They invited me for several consecutive years. The first time I went with Pat Carini. And then I went once or twice by myself. Largely at one school and then once at another. All of that through Matsushida. The person in charge for Matsushida was a woman named Sophie Sa. She and Debbie became very close after awhile. Debbie, I think, helped her; advised her in things to do.

AT: You were getting a sense of yourself as an exemplary figure.

AS: Yeah. I was now meeting with other teachers and sort of doing show-and-tell. I went to San Diego; I went to Santa Fe. I set up conference meetings with teachers and observations in classrooms, and taught some of the Prospect processes.

AT: What was your pitch?

AS: My pitch was "observation, description, collection of work, thinking, how to think about children, how to talk to families." The usual *sh tick*.

AT: This was your post-doctoral work.

AS: You know, I found it wonderful to go to these places, but never found it very satisfying because it was such a, you know, it was two days and then I leave, and how much do people get? How much do they understand?

AT: It was very 'learning-intensive.'

AS: It was intense because people were very eager and very thoughtful and very responsive and all of that. But I never had a sense of whether any of it went any place. I met some lovely people, wonderful teachers.

AT: You're sort of describing your public.

AS: Right. But it was a school-teaching public.

AT: What about the political class in this country? Were they ever part of this public?

AS: Only if they were ever invited to the North Dakota Study Group. Occasionally, Vito would find

some wild-eyed radicals (chuckle) to speak to us. But I was never drawn to them or what they had to say. I was never involved in the organization of NDSG's meetings. I just went there to meet and talk to people. Once a whole bunch of us from Prospect made a presentation about teaching and learning. But I only wanted to talk about what I did, and how I did it, and why it mattered. Not since high school was I ever terribly interested in politics in a broader sense.

AT: You were protected from district politics by Debbie.

AS: Well, you know, District 6 was, by definition, a political place, and some people were more engaged in the politics than others. But to the extent that Tony Alvarado represented a particular point of view and publicly said, "I will support this thing and this thing and this thing," whatever his private shenanigans were--to that extent, we were sort of free to do as we sought fit, and Debbie protected us from everything else. And it was her standard line for a long time that because schools were in such trouble and things were so terrible, nobody really cared much about what we did. And she was right! There was such turmoil in the city in those first seven years. And so we had this little school, and Tony said, "Yeah, go ahead, do it." And we did it. Nobody bothered us very much, and by the time—

AT: Nobody bothered you, but you didn't bother anyone else.

AS: We didn't bother anybody else.

AT: You didn't bother anyone's conscience.

AS: No, no. Because we were just six classrooms, eight classrooms. There were occasional run-ins with the principal of the building, who was quite conservative. A terrible woman, if I may say so.

AT: Her school was part of another world, sort of.

AS: It was. Totally.

AT: And basically so were a large portion of the teachers in the district.

AS: That's right.

AT: You didn't politicize what you were doing.

AS: We were not politicizing or proselytizing. If some group of teachers from some other place asked us to speak to them about what we were doing, or wanted to do an art workshop together, or come for a visit, we did all that. But if there was any political flack, then Debbie stepped in to handle it, for the most part. That was part of her responsibility. And there wasn't much of that. We kept getting terrific press. And it was deserved; it wasn't fake. They came, they looked, we talked, and they left with the sense that here was an articulate, smart, thoughtful, creative bunch of teachers who showed all these kids' work, and how bad could it be? I mean, they really were mostly quite impressed. And, over the years, we became more and more familiar with the value of that.

During Jane's tenure as head, for a year or two, we had a connection with the Crafts Museum. They were very involved in our school. They put the work of our students on display in an exhibition there. So there were those connections. And then, once we moved to 106th Street, we used the school for our own exhibitions. We would have art exhibits for parents, and Barry did those student concerts several times a year. We had other events where parents came: art and reading workshops.

AT: A couple of minutes back, you started to talk about the people in the North Dakota Study Group who were meaningful to you. You mentioned Joe Suina, a Pueblo Indian.

AS: Joe Suina was the most meaningful, I think. His was a world I knew only from books. I had never met a person who lived that life. It wasn't that he was an exotic. It was that he had lived the life that was so different from mine.

AT: Diane Mullins, who had been an elementary school teacher in Greenwich Village, said something similar in her interview. She felt that what was most meaningful for her at these meetings were all the different voices from around the country.

AS: Yeah, right.

AT: Different sounds, different tones of voice, different ways of talking American speech.

AS: Well, also different experiences. I mean there were people, like Joe, whose whole teaching world—I mean, we're all teachers, more or less, so we had that common ground; but then everybody's individual, personal story was sort of unique and distinctive. It was a little like that at the annual Catherine Maloney Lecture at the City College Workshop Center, but the crowd was much more diverse at the North Dakota Study Group, people from different worlds, and it was wonderful to be able to meet with them and talk to them. Our meetings weren't so much about the issues in education, as far as I was concerned, although those issues--testing for one, and certification for another—were always the subtext. The goal was eventually to develop strong critiques of standardized testing. But every year testing increased and so there was an inverse relationship between what the goals were and what the results were. As the group expanded, over the years, it took in other issues. Testing was always dreadful, but it seems like we were never ever going to succeed in dismantling it, and we didn't. And so for some part of the time, we sort of worked around it. What is it that football players do when they go around the side?

AT: End run.

AS: End run, right. We thought we could do an end run around the tests. But my involvement was essentially not, I have to say, not political, particularly, although in 1968, when we struck, I was the chapter chair of the union in my school. I would say I was a very ardent unionist and still am. And it felt like the strength of the union needed to be sustained and supported. I was never ever totally convinced of the sincerity of Rhody McCoy and that group of folks. Somehow they seemed opportunistic, glib, manipulative—there was something about them that didn't persuade me. And I had a friend who was a principal in Bedford-Stuyvesant, who opened her school and went in and out. She was a very serious, ardent unionist, too, but found it more important to support the folks who were in the community. It was a very peculiar time.

AT: Enlarge, for me, on the concept of "peculiar?"

AS: My friend felt very strongly that she had to support community control, and I felt--I mean, I wouldn't have come to blows about it, but I felt it was very important to support the union. So I did.

AT: And then, in developing as a teacher, you came to learn how to support parents?

AS: I was supportive of parents from the beginning. In fact, I didn't feel like that strike--up there in the Bronx, at least--was about opposing the community, because I think the issue of community control, whatever all the political undergrowth was--and God knows there must have been plenty--wasn't directly relevant to our situation. We had a reasonably good relationship with the parents. We had already opened that parent room, to which parents came and sat and whatever. When we set up the picket line and the parents came, there was no confrontation; there was no argument. They said, "We're going in." We said, "Go, goodbye." And then we started to organize classrooms in churches--freedom schools, we called them, in sympathetic vibrations with what was going on in Mississippi. And some of us did that for a few days, until it petered out. That was not really a serious effort. But it was a terrible time. There were so many issues that were not ever clearly articulated, clearly confronted, because everybody had their own political agenda.

Al Shanker, the head of the union, felt very seriously that the union, which was still a relatively young organization, was being threatened, which it was. It's not so different now with the charter school movement, where folks are trying to reduce the effectiveness, the power of the union, which I think is terrible! I can't imagine finding a circumstance where that was justifiable. There may be one in the future, but I'm out of that business now, so I don't have to take sides.

Then there were the folks in Bedford-Stuyvesant and their agenda and their purposes. And then, finally, the board of education, which of all organizations deserved to be eradicated. Although who knows what these guys, Bloomberg and Klein, are doing now.

AT: As a teacher you've come to support very progressive practices, But you don't go on much about Dewey. You don't come on like Hoffer's 'true believer.'

AS: Oh, because I didn't start out with the ideology, although I really always was interested. Periodically I would reread Dewey. Particularly the part where he talks about the classroom and the furniture in the classroom and how it should be and what size it should be and all of that. That was just sort of a touchstone for what this is about, and how do you do it, and all of that. Dewey said when you think about children, you have to think about everything, not just what you're going to teach them. You have to think about the furniture, and the size of the chairs, and where they go. That was a very, sort of, condensed idea that reminded me that it's not just about what am I going to teach them today? It's what is this classroom going to be?

AT: Dewey was very much interested in what you can learn when you brought things together in a particular way.

AS: You know what? I didn't read him, even when we did it at Prospect, I didn't read him as a philosophical text. I read him as a reminder of what I should be thinking about, or what I shouldn't forget. That was one thing, what is the classroom to be? The weaving stuff was another one.

AT: What weaving stuff?

AS: Just sections in a textbook. Did he call it curriculum--maybe he did—sections in a book about what curriculum would look like. So I read those sections: "Now you should be weaving with kids" and why it was important, and so I did weaving with kids.

AT: You weren't embarrassed to think of yourself as doing progressive education.

AS: You know, I really didn't think of it that way. I really didn't identify with being progressive particularly. It wasn't a mark of special distinction, for me, to be a progressive teacher. I didn't call myself a progressive teacher. I said I taught at CPE, if I said anything. If I used any of that language, I used "child centered," which to me, you know, was more telling. "Progressive" in some ways is too big a term.

AT: Would you say the community of educators open to progressive ideas is any greater now than when you

first started?

AS: Oh, yeah. But when I first started, I didn't think in those terms, so who knew? Except in my first experience at school--at 92, there was a teacher who had been there for a very long time, and everybody thought of her as being quite terrific because she did all these wonderful things with kids. I think she taught 3rd grade. She had a whole collection of *chatchkes*, little things. When her kids do writing, she would go around with a basketful of these things, and each kid would pick one out, and whatever they picked out they would write about. They were little toys--little pocketbooks, baskets, trinkets. She said she had been trained by a progressive, in a progressive school. I can't remember any more than that. But that was the first time I remember hearing that phrase: progressive. And I always associated it with these little trinkets that you gave kids. She stuck the trinket on their paper and had them write about it! That was "progressive." (chuckle) So you see where the thing stands with me. I also met somebody, much later, who went to the New Lincoln School, which the Rockefeller family founded, and which was extremely progressive. I wasn't very aware of educational theory or educational philosophy or any of that until way later, when I got interested, and then I read Froebel and Piaget and all those guys. But that was after I'd been doing the work for a while. I don't know if it would have done me any good to read it at the beginning. You need experience first. Then you can ask questions of whatever it is you're reading.

AT: When you say, as you did earlier, that Prospect was where you could explore the more philosophical implications of your work, what was that? What were the big ideas that you were exploring?

AS: Oh, God! Who knows? (chuckle) I don't get big ideas! I'm not Albert Camus!

AT: When you say Prospect is where you went to explore philosophical implications, what do you mean?.

AS: Philosophical in contrast to--not technical, but whatever description we can use for hands-on stuff. That's one whole set of things that you can explore.

AT: You developed your capacity to be reflective.

AS: At Prospect I got to examine ideas that until then sort of half flipped through my mind when I was actually sitting in front of a kid and taking dictation or making a book or watching him paint or making cookies. What do we mean when we say, "working collaboratively," rather than "individually?"

AT: Was there ever a time in that period when the political discourse about education in New York matched, or connected with, the effort that you were making? Did you ever get a response from the political establishment about your teacherly assertions.

AS: I don't know quite what you mean by the "political establishment."

AT: Well, the conversation that goes on in the political realm about education. Do you think it ever got straight—during this time—what you were trying to do?

AS: For me personally? No, not much. I think I did my political discoursing at Prospect. I think that was the place where my big ideas were formulated, insofar as I had any big ideas. And with my fellow teacher at CPE, Donny Rotkin, in the car, mornings and afternoons, coming and going, where we hashed out some of our political thoughts and philosophies, and at school, at CPE.

AT: I'm not questioning whether or not you had political thoughts about what you were doing. I'm wondering if you had any sense a public was forming--a public that was tuned in, listening--that could support what you were doing on a broader scale.

AS: If they were, I wouldn't have recognized it.

AT: Because I don't have a sense that at present there is any recognition of a history.

AS: Oh, there is no such recognition. In fact, it's quite the opposite. They are dismantling things historical as fast as they can get their hands on them. And they want to put it away, because the whole thrust of everything now is to go back to those old routines and all those old rigidities. If they could they'd screw those

seats back into the floor, if they still have them. I'm sure some of them would want to do that as a way of getting kids to—I mean, this latest thing about training children to look at the person who's talking so that your attention is engaged ... what is that? What IS that? What do they call it? Telling a little kid, a six-year-old, 'sit up straight, fold your hands, look at the person's who's talking, and nod your head to show you are listening.' My, God! It's dreadful. It is so dreadful. It's like a whole—I don't want to say it's discouraging, but it really is.

AT: At CPE, when you were teaching, were there questions that you never solved?

AS: Oh, I hope so! (chuckle)

AT: What were the questions?

AS: That depended on what the situation was. It's not cut and dried. It has to do with the child. I don't think we ever successfully... I shouldn't say "we"... I, personally, never successfully solved the issue of what to do, for instance, about kids who were, for a variety of reasons, not academically inclined. What do you do with that? That was ongoing, from the day I started teaching, and I never worked it out. Where you could say, "Okay, this guy loves motors, let's find him a way of becoming a mechanic." But the institutions were not there to support that, and still aren't. That was one whole set of issues. How hard do you push and how far do you go in insisting that some kid develop these academic skills and interests when they really don't give a hoot, and why should I force them? You know? That was a big part of it. And we--we, I--sort of waffle between those two poles, which is leave them alone, support what he can do, she can do, help where it's needed, and let the youngster find his or her own way. That was one pole. And the other one: She (or he) is now in 4th grade and it's not happening. Am I doing this child a disservice by not forcing something? I don't know. I never worked that one out.

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1. Alice Munro, in an interview.
