



Photograph by Francis Wardle

Observation: The Primary Tool in Assessment

by Kay Stritzel Rencken



“Most teachers want to know more about their students . . . what engages and interests them . . . we want to be more effective” (Ayres, 1993, p. 33). Observing and recording the behaviors of young children on a consistent basis helps to do this. Teachers will never know the complexity of the student but will have pieces of the puzzle — hopefully enough pieces so that a picture of the student emerges. Knowing children provides a way to chart the growth and plan for the learning to come.

Assessment, “the process of observing, recording, and otherwise documenting the work children do and how they do it, as a basis for a variety of educational decisions that affect the child, including planning for groups and individual children and communicating with parents . . . requires teachers to observe and analyze regularly what the children are doing in light of the content goals and the learning processes” (NAEYC, 1992, p. 10). NAEYC also lists the principles that should guide assessment for young children. An early childhood educator needs to be versed in these principles.

Learning to See the Whole Child

Observing young children requires the gathering of evidence of growth in a natural setting. An early childhood classroom is a familiar place where the child feels at ease in experimenting and exploring with blocks, various art media, writing, computers, puppets. This experimentation and exploration provides a rich storehouse of

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observable information for the teacher skilled in gleaning it from the play that surrounds the child. Observing in this setting looks at the whole child — not fragments or skills that are out of context. When a child is counting to see how many friends are at school today, there is authenticity; but when asked to count objects for a test, the reason is absent.

One of the important benefits of doing observations is that teachers are viewing many components at the same time. Unlike standardized tests, which focus only on cognition, observations allow the teacher to see the whole child. The emotional, physical, social, and cultural dimensions of the child are equally important, especially with the younger child.

Finding/Making Opportunities to Observe

Early childhood teaching is a task that is filled with movement. Often teachers are doing ten tasks at the same time, moving from place to place, talking to children in the block, house, and writing centers. This view of perpetual motion pervades the profession. It is hard for many teachers to understand when they will find the time and how they can remain stationary and unobtrusive enough to observe the children. It requires a different mindset of the role of teaching young children. Observing and recording is just as crucial to good teaching as providing the setting, structuring the day, and planning the curriculum. Anne Benjamin (1993) gives many practical hints on how the teacher can effectively observe and record by planning what and when you observe, providing activities that don't directly involve the teacher, and having spots in the room that let teachers see and hear what is happening.

Teachers can also become skilled participant observers. They observe the development of a particular child or activity within the setting. These narrative observations often read like a story. They relate what happened during the day and are the basis for reflection and planning activities that will occur the next day. Teachers are full of stories of what happened in their room. These stories can be the basis of putting theory into practice or practice into theory as they are shared with other early childhood educators. These stories give voice to a group that has been silenced for far too long.

Keeping Records of Observations

Observing children often comes very easily. Teachers watch and remember what children are doing and how they accomplish the task. But observing without recording is only half of the picture. Teachers must find ways to keep all the information that they traditionally store in

their heads. Insights are gained about who is being observed on a consistent basis. Stand-outs at either end of the spectrum are always remembered. Record keeping often reveals that some children are being observed more than the shy child or the invisible child or the child that is just minding to the business of playing and getting along. Careful records reveal information about the observer, such as preferences for certain centers of the room or certain times of the day. These insights offer the teacher an opportunity to broaden the perspective of the observations and record keeping.

Sharing Observations with Parents

Detailed records kept over time reveal growth in many areas. This can be shared with parents during formal and informal conferencing. Parents want to know more about their child's progress and they want to know that the teacher knows and understands their child. A good conference means that the adults are sharing the information about the growth and development of the child. It is a personal story that each shares with the other and is often done with laughter, concern, caring, and love. Most report cards and tests don't convey that the teacher really knows the child as good observational records do.

Using Observations for Planning

Detailed observational records are necessary to show the value of a curriculum that is based on children's needs. Planning begins with a knowledge of the age group and goals. Observation provides insights so that planning can be done to meet individual needs and evaluates the learning that takes place. Along the way, there are modifications made to meet individual and group needs and the cycle begins again.

Considering Assessment

We are living in an era when early childhood educators are being asked to subject their children to all sorts of tests to determine a variety of information for a variety of purposes. Many of these are good tests, as tests go, but most of them subject a child to time spent away from learning so that someone can quickly determine what they have learned or not learned.

Often tests focus on what the child does not know. They are designed to show areas of weakness. Good observations focus on what the child knows and document areas of strengths. Areas of concern are often closely linked to these strengths and are noted.

Many of the tests given to young children are not for their benefit but to:



- help fund programs;
- help train staff;
- provide jobs for the testers and companies that make them; and
- provide accountability statistics.

This is not to say that providing funds and training and accountability are necessarily bad, but there are other means of achieving the same results. Test results do not yield new information to the experienced observer.

Standardized testing is often not age appropriate. By definition, it is standardized and therefore for only a small portion of our children. Non-standardized tests are often very subjective. These tests and the time it takes to administer them are very costly.

Testing is very time consuming and takes time away from what a young child should be doing in a developmentally appropriate program. It also requires that time be spent after the testing to rebuild the child's self-esteem.

The issue of who administers the test is a two-edge sword. There is an ethical concern if the teacher is also the administrator of the test because, in testing lingo, she lacks the objectivity necessary. If an "outsider" who is unfamiliar to the child administers the test, the child probably will not be comfortable and will not perform as well.

These tests count for a disproportionate amount and matter a lot more to the adult than to the child. If funding or accountability are the reasons for a test, it matters more to the adult. If inclusion in gifted programs or a special preschool are the reasons, it matters more to the adult. Rarely does the test have meaning for the child.

Whenever there is widespread testing, there is also a phenomenon called "teaching to the test." This is not a new concept, but the fact that it is appearing in early childhood settings is new and alarming. Even the very best teachers who work to provide a play-based and developmentally appropriate setting are subject to this concept. Soon the test becomes the curriculum. This downward push of academic skills is not good early childhood education.

Early childhood educators are striving for professional recognition. In the past, we have had the view that we

were not seen as "professional" as others. It was easy to cede the role of "expert" to people in other professions like psychologists, social workers, and physicians. They are experts in their field, but we are experts in ours! We know the children in our care because we observe them for many hours a day and watch how they react in a variety of settings, using many different tools, and working/playing with many different children and adults.

In order for teachers to resist the testing phenomenon, we must provide useful information about the growth and development of the children in our care. We must use our voices to articulate our observations as an integral tool of assessment in our classrooms. We must become proficient observers and recorders of the behaviors of young children. Observation is the root of all we do as teachers.

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