

Taking It All In Observation in the Classroom

Judy Jablon

Do you ever walk from one place to another, seeing almost nothing? Not even sure how you got there? Then, at other times, you walk slowly, taking in lots of sights and sounds. You notice some lovely red roses, the unusual patterns on a building, or how the light flickers through the trees. Maybe you hear birds chirping or an airplane flying overhead. When you walk this way, you are open and receptive, which leads to curiosity and wonder.

In the classroom, where there's so much going on, it's easy to be on autopilot, moving from one child to another, one place to the next, scanning the room just to be sure everything's okay. But when you slow down just a little bit, you can see and hear so much more.

Watching and listening to children with curiosity and wonder lets you learn more about them—their interests, who they are, what puts a smile or frown on their faces, what they know and can do. Using observation in this way makes teaching more rewarding!

Observation is a powerful teaching resource

When you teach with your eyes, ears, and mind open to what is happening around you, observation makes you a much better teacher. Observation can

- help you get to know children so that you can build relationships with them. When children sense that you know them, they feel safe and secure and are more open to learning.
- give you the information you need to make wise decisions about what and how to teach each child. You can respond in just the right way if you take a moment to observe in the midst of an interaction.
- enhance your knowledge of child development and learning.
- help you gather evidence about children's progress toward meeting curriculum goals.
- provide you with specific examples of what children know and can do that you can share with their families. Family members love to hear stories about their child's accomplishments. When a child's progress is slower or more advanced, it is important to have factual information to share that shows exactly what the child can do and what the child might be ready to learn.
- add interest and excitement to your work. Let your curiosity about children guide you.

The teacher can use what she learns in the following observation to plan new ways to support Claire's literacy development.

A teacher sees Claire reading the book she's written to two other children in the library. She observes how Claire holds the book, turns the pages, and makes up a story to go with the pictures.

Make your observations more effective

When you are intentional about observing, you can learn even more about children and be more effective as a responsive teacher. Here are some strategies to help you.

Focus on what children actually do and say. As you observe, notice details and avoid immediate interpretations. It's easy to form opinions with very little evidence, but often those judgments are inaccurate. When observing children, focus on the facts—what you see and hear, not a quickly formed impression.

For example, this observation provides information about what Darius knows and can do and why:

Darius has a unit block in each hand; he slowly places them on each end of a double unit block, increasing the height of his block tower. He sits back and looks. Then he asks Jorge, "What do you think we should put on the building now?"

Reflect on who you are as an observer. Our beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, and expectations about people and



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What do you want to know about children?

Your questions—what you want to know about children—guide your observations. Each morning, allow yourself a few minutes to wonder about children. Ask yourself, What do I want to learn about children today? Observation provides you with answers. Your questions will change as you get to know children better, notice how they are changing, or when specific issues come up for a child and family. What do you wonder about the children in your group?

- Who does Henry like to play with? Watch him during choice time, and you may get an answer.
- What materials would help Shantelle learn to recognize letter names? Watch where she plays and the materials she chooses. Use what you find out to include resources that will engage her and help her learn more about letters.
- What toys keep Hakeem engaged? You can find clues by keeping track of how long he spends at each center during choice time and seeing how he plays.
- What makes Rosella laugh? Did reading *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* put a smile on her face?



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events shape what and how we see. Pay attention to your own experiences, beliefs, and influences. They may affect your observations. For example, if you grew up with no brothers, you may not be as familiar with the rough-and-tumble play that some boys display and may be more likely to interpret it as aggressive. When you don't understand something a child is doing, keep an open mind. Ask the child's family member or a colleague to help you understand the behavior.



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Observe over time and in different settings. It takes time to really get to know children. One observation gives you just a little bit of a picture. The more you observe, the more you can learn.

For example, you know that Roxanne tends to listen while others share during read-alouds. But in dramatic play you see her dressing up as a firefighter and telling her two friends that the siren is ringing and they have to hurry to put out the fire. Children behave differently in different situations and at different times of the day.

Observe in many ways. Take photographs of children as they work. Have conversations and jot down their words. Observe their drawings, paintings, block buildings, and other creations (collages, playdough, or clay structures). Talk with family members to find out more about the child.

Document your observations. Recording what you observe provides evidence about what children know and can do. Your notes or other documentation can help you know how to respond to children and plan for instruction. There are many ways to record your observations. Try out different methods, and see what works for you. Some documentation methods include

- Anecdotes, brief notes, or jottings: these written descriptions include the date, the child's name, where the observation occurred, and what the child said and did. (See the examples on page 27.)
- Diagrams, sketches, or photographs: these provide visual documentation of your observations.
- Tallies or checklists: this is a way to record observations without detailed information.

Organize your observations. Many teachers use a notebook or file folders to organize their observations. With each entry be sure to include the date, the child's name, the setting the child is in, the time of day, and the activity. Create a system that lets you review information as you plan and when you are preparing to talk with families.

Make it manageable. Becoming a more *intentional and focused* observer will make your teaching more enjoyable, especially if you have reasonable expectations for yourself. Consider these tips:

- Allow yourself to be curious about children.
- Slow down, and be present while you interact with children.
- Observe a few children each day.
- Work with a colleague.

Observation and teaching go hand in hand

At choice time, Isabel and her assistant Denisha move from one center to another interacting with the 4-year-olds in their classroom. They each carry a clipboard with different-colored sticky notes attached so that they can easily jot down observations (and know who observed each child). Isabel and Denisha have established a comfortable routine for observation and interaction, and they each strive to observe and document their interactions with three children each day. They jot down notes while they talk and play with the children. Sometimes they spend about two minutes with each child, observing and interacting. Other times, a bit longer. By the end of the week, each teacher has observed and interacted with all 15 children. The teachers take a few minutes at nap time at the end of the week to share what they have each learned.

Don't worry about observing the *right* way, finding the perfect way to record, or making sure you see everything. Instead, give yourself permission to wonder about children and then watch and listen to learn. As you interact with children, take time to notice what they do and say. Use what you learn from observation to make decisions about how to respond in the moment and as you plan.

9/17 Kai

Outdoors 3 pm

K asks for baggie to take outside. Wants to collect twigs. Walks around yard, head close to ground, picks up sticks, looks at each, keeps some—tosses others.

Me: Kai, I notice that you are deciding which sticks to keep and which to leave. Tell me about how you decide.

K: I want skinny ones. And look (she shows me) some bend a little. I like these.

Me: Perhaps when we go inside, you can use a magnifier to look at your sticks more closely.

K (jumping and smiling): Yeah! I thought about that.

—Isabel

RESOURCES

Curtis, D., & M. Carter. 2002. *The art of awareness: How observation can transform your teaching*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

Jablon, J., A.L. Dombro, & M.L. Dichtelmiller. 2009. *The power of observation*. 2nd ed. Washington, DC: Teaching Strategies & NAEYC.

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9/17 Tyshawn

Art area 10:30 am

Uses glue, fabric, paper & popsicle sticks for collage. Arranging pieces on cardboard—then glues.

Me: I comment that she seems to have a plan.

T: “When the pieces are sticky it’s hard to move ‘em around. So I glue after. I’m making people and putting clothes on them. Do you like it?”

I nod and use the word *fashion* to describe the clothing she’s created.

T (using new word): Yeah—I wanted them to have nice fashions. See this color? (pointing to hot pink) It’s my favorite.

—Denisha

SUPPORTING DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Remember to observe what children do and say, even if you do not speak the same language they do. Watch to see when a child is excited, whom they play with, and the materials they choose. Focus on what the child can do, not what the child isn’t doing. Ask for help from colleagues and family members to help you understand what children know and can do. Gather examples of the interesting things that the child can do to share with his or her family.