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Part 2

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Editorial

Observing Children's Development – Part 2

Sue Allingham

This Journal follows up the Spring edition with a further in-depth look at observing children's development.

As the Department for Education in England moves towards a revision of the Early Learning Goals we must not lose sight of the importance of a fundamental part of sound pedagogy. We are in danger of the skill of observation being increasingly overlooked and dismissed.

Since the publication of the last Journal, we have heard who the provider of the next incarnation of "baseline assessment" in England will be. According to the Government website, the assessment will:

...be administered as a twenty-minute, teacher-recorded assessment of children's communication, language, literacy and early mathematics skills. It will cover material that many children will already be familiar with and pupils will not have to prepare for it, either at home or in school. (DfE, 2018)

This is to be an accountability tool in order to measure progress from Reception to the end of Year 6. But what will this 20 minute exercise really show that is of any immediate use to underpin a child's learning and development? Although that is not alleged to be the main intention of the "assessment", it will inevitably give a viewpoint of the child. And without observers skilled in child development, this viewpoint will be very skewed.

The construction of this personal cognitive jigsaw has many parallels with the construction of the traditional wooden puzzle. At first, the pieces of the cognitive jigsaw are picked seemingly at random. Sometimes the piece fits straight away; sometimes it is turned round and round – with astonishing patience – before the fit is finally made. Sometimes the piece is turned round and round and a fit is made and only subsequent pieces show the piece to be in the wrong place.

Sometimes the piece is turned round and round, does not quite fit but is jammed in anyway because it is more satisfying to have reached a solution than to have to start again.

It is the skill of the educator to be aware of the pieces of the jigsaw that the child already has in place and whether or not they have been fitted together correctly.

The "teacher" – whether an adult or another child – needs to be informative without being imposing. Imposition simply leads to the learner becoming confused and disaffected. Confusion arises because the links between the pieces have been made by the teacher and not by the learner. Disaffection occurs because the initiative has been taken away from the learner and the construction no longer makes sense.

(Fisher 1996:7, my italics)

How will the pieces make sense without observing children's development?

In this edition:

Tamsin Grimmer looks at observing and extending schemas in practice. She discusses how important it is to tune into children's interests and fascinations and uses cases studies to demonstrate the importance of appropriately interpreting what we see.

Stella Louis discusses the importance of the characteristics of effective learning and how using our knowledge of these informs us about the goals, purpose and challenges of self-initiated play, and the learning skills the children are demonstrating.

Debi Keyte-Hartland analyses the way we document what we see. It makes what we see and hear "visible" to others in order that we may reflect and interpret to more appropriately inform our work and that of the child.

Julia Manning-Morton uses the filters of "Noticing, Recognising, Responding and Reflecting", to examine each part of the process of observing a child, pointing out observations are not just about assessment, rather they are about a meaningful understanding.

Anni McTavish, through a study of imaginative play in a Glasgow nursery gives an example of how a skilled team use observation to support English as an additional language (EAL). This enables them to build sensitively on children's experiences and understanding.

These articles perfectly sum up why we need to celebrate and promote the pedagogy of observing children's development at a time when the national agenda appears increasingly dismissive of it.

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Observing and extending schemas in practice

Tamsin Grimmer

Tuning into children's interests and fascinations is part of daily practice for those working with or caring for young children. Children are often engaged in play that is repetitive in nature, for example lining up their toys, or they show a particular fascination for something, such as a keen interest in wheels. It is these repeated patterns of behaviour that are often referred to as schemas.

Schematic behaviour has been researched, discussed and studied over the years by many theorists. Piaget is possibly one of the earliest and most widely recognised of these. He examined patterns of behaviour or schemas in relation to thought and action (1952). He believed that when young children repeat actions, they are able to transfer their ideas into similar situations or generalise them into early concepts about the world around them. They are ways of organising thinking to help children make sense of the world.

Other theorists suggest schemas are like pieces of ideas or concepts (Meade and Cubey, 2008). This is a little bit like children doing a jigsaw. They do not yet have all of the pieces so they try to make sense of the jigsaw according to the pieces they do have. Through repeating different actions children are able to investigate and predict what will happen again. If they were right, the jigsaw piece fits, if they were wrong they may need to re-think and get another jigsaw piece.

Atherton and Nutbrown acknowledge the difficulty in defining schemas as they state, "There are many different definitions of schema but no single characterisation is able to satisfy, as no single definition encompasses the complexity and perspectives which emerge" (2013:8). However, Athey defined schemas as, "a pattern of repeatable behaviour" (2007) and it is this view that I pick up on in my book, *Observing and Developing Schematic Behaviour in Young Children* (Grimmer, 2017) where I consider the action or movement that is repeated (eg connection, transporting etc.) and unpick these actions, offering an interpretation and suggestions of how to support and extend the child's thinking.

Piaget and Athey believed that schematic behaviour leads children to develop ideas and concepts which form the basis of their understanding. Through exploration, children are able to generalise about objects, categorise and classify their properties and make assumptions about why things happen and how things work. Children are like scientists who are doing experiments methodically and investigating carefully in order to test their theories (Gopnik, 2010).

According to Nutbrown, a couple of factors are essential for quality practice in relation to schemas. Firstly, having practitioners who are skilled observers of young children, and secondly, that they can use these observations to plan an interesting, inviting and stimulating learning environment.

Interpreting what we see

The following examples look at schematic behaviour in terms of:

- ▶ What is the child actually doing? (Observing the child)
- ▶ What does this mean in relation to their learning and development? (Interpreting what you see)
- ▶ What can I plan for them to do next? (Further extending the schema).

Connection schema

Connections and disconnections are all around us, from a simple task like dressing, with all the many different fastenings, to a more complicated task like assembling a flat-packed piece of furniture. Some children can become particularly interested in how objects and materials join together. This can be described as a connection schema.

Take for example Georgia (17 months old) who is displaying an interest in connection. The connection schema can be observed in all ages of children and usually involves children focusing on joining pieces together, either by attaching them in some way or making them physically touch each other.

Georgia (17 months) is playing with the wooden train track and focusing hard on connecting two pieces of track together. After a couple of minutes of trying she is successful and then gets a train and moves it over the short piece of track. She tries to join more pieces of track together and spends a further five minutes joining another piece on. She is very pleased with the end result, smiles and claps her effort!



Georgia concentrates really hard on joining the train track together. Although it fits together like a loose jigsaw piece, it still requires good fine-motor control and a lot of concentration. She focuses on this task, joining more pieces of track together until she feels that she has enough for her train. Her pleasure and satisfaction in achieving the task of connecting the track is wonderful to see as she claps herself.

We can extend the connection schema and support children in many ways. Georgia may like to explore different ways of connecting things – perhaps she would be interested in a more difficult task such as threading.

Enclosing schema

The washing basket in our house is rarely used as a washing basket. It has been a pirate ship, a rocket, and a school for teddies, amongst other things! More often than not, one of my children would sit in it, enjoying being enclosed in the basket. They sometimes squeezed cushions in with them to surround themselves with comfort. The enclosing schema is about children who surround themselves, parts of their body, objects or space with a border. The enclosures can be any size or shape and made from any materials. This schema has very close links with containing and enveloping and is very difficult to discuss in isolation.

Tom (4 years, 2 months) was building with the small wooden blocks. He created

a sort of platform with the blocks, laying them side-by-side on the table. He then balanced two blocks on the top in a T shape. Tom carefully lined up the blocks in a border putting them down one by one which totally enclosed his construction. As Tom did this he said, "One more" and he placed the last block in place. He then went on to make borders with the blocks around a toy cup and around another construction made by his brother which was already on the table.



Tom focused on making the blocks touch each other, which linked with his connection schema, and he was also positioning the blocks so that they made a T-shape – possibly a capital "T" for Tom. Later he used the blocks to make borders around everything that he could find on the table. Tom's language indicates that he is interested in quantity and he is estimating that he will need another block to finish the enclosure. All of these blocks are the same size as each other and thus he is actually exploring size in terms of units – how many blocks will I need to make a border around the construction? How many will I need around this smaller cup?

By providing Tom access to different materials, perhaps unit blocks or geometric shapes, we could tap into his interest in estimating how many blocks he will need to make borders. He might enjoy the opportunity to make borders out of different materials both inside and outside.

Transporting schema

Much of our adult life is spent transporting things from A to B – the washing from the machine to the washing line, the shopping from the shops to home, papers and files from desk to briefcase. Many people have a handbag or backpack that they carry things around in and we always carry our clothes or things we might need in rucksacks or suitcases when out for a day's hike or off on holiday. So it should be no surprise that many children imitate this behaviour and can show a keen interest and fascination for moving things around and transporting objects, themselves or others from here to there.

Cassie (1 year 11 months) would often be seen pushing her pushchair around and would fill it with all sorts of toys. It came as no surprise to her mum when Cassie's friend Rose visited that Cassie decided to push her around in the pushchair!

Cassie has a transporting schema – she loves to move things around from one place to another. Cassie is exploring movement and how to move all sorts of things. By pushing Rose around in the pushchair, she is extending her ideas of what you can transport. Will Rose fit in the pushchair? Will I be able to push her? Can I move Rose from here to there all on my own?

We can build on Cassie's fascination with transporting things by offering her alternative ways to do this. She could be interested in filling bags and using them to transport toys from place to place. Cassie might like to have a go on a ride-on bike which has space for her to take a friend on the back. Alternatively, Cassie may want to fill the pushchair with her toys and push it around, perhaps when outside her home.

In summary

Schemas are patterns of repeated behaviour and thinking which help the child to understand the world through exploration and investigation. Some children clearly follow one schema, others more than one schema at once, while other children may not follow any at all. Overall, within the early years age group it is common for children to exhibit schematic behaviour and this should not be considered as concerning or worrying by parents or practitioners. Schemas are an interesting part of many children's development.

When practitioners have an understanding of schemas it helps them to:

- ▶ understand why children do certain things and behave in certain ways
- ▶ have a clear focus for observing children
- ▶ get to know their children better in terms of their interests and fascinations
- ▶ use a new language that better describes children's actions and behaviours
- ▶ support and extend children's learning and provide an enabling environment within which children can explore and investigate
- ▶ provide more open-ended opportunities for learning
- ▶ see the value in repetitive play which will, in turn, strengthen the neural pathways in children's brains
- ▶ share their understanding about

schemas with other parents and professionals

- ▶ see children as competent learners and co-constructors of knowledge.

Questions for reflection

- ▶ Have you identified any schematic behaviour?
- ▶ What do you think the child is investigating?
- ▶ Can you describe the learning that is taking place?
- ▶ How can you support and extend the child's fascinations?
- ▶ How is the learning environment enabling and supporting these schemas?
- ▶ What activities and resources cater for their interests, schemas, fascinations and individual needs?
- ▶ Are there any challenging behaviours displayed that are probably schematic?
- ▶ How can you further support children and redirect this behaviour?

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What the characteristics of effective learning might tell us about the goals, purpose and challenges of self-initiated play

Stella Louis

Bruce (1996:8) reinforces the need for the challenge of self-initiated play as she argues that the features of play embed and coordinate learning. She describes a network of first-hand experience, games, representations and play. The characteristics of effective learning are a key aspect of early childhood. They describe ways in which children learn. In this article I will explore what the characteristics might tell us about this “network” for learning and the importance of observation to inform our teaching.

Why are observations of self-initiated play important?

For example, why do children enjoy opening and closing cupboards and drawers? It might be linked to the routine experience of opening the car door or household doors. This kind of exploration can lead children to discover the possibilities of objects and or materials. They find out that cupboard doors and drawers can move forward and backwards. They can make connections with other materials that move backwards and forward such as the swing. Play always has a goal; there is always a reason and challenge that can be found when adults observe systematically. It is noteworthy to mention that what children are capable of doing cannot be understood unless adults observe, listen and question what they are seeing. This means that adult motivation for recording observation cannot only be based on outcomes but must also be based on an understanding of the child’s strengths and interests as a starting point. Here the adult role is to use observation to support the play and then proceed to deepen and extend play and learning.

According to Froebel (1887), play is one of the most important aspects of human development. Children not only explore their feelings, ideas and relationships in play but it also contains symbolic representations, interests, strengths and fantasies. Here we see the network of

learning to which Bruce (1996) refers. For example, Sarah says to Rose, “Pretend you are scared. You have to be scared and then we can put the light on and have a hot chocolate.”

Sarah is exploring her feelings of being scared. She is also creating a story to represent her understanding of her experience. Sarah’s play can also be seen to be linked to the characteristics of effective learning as it helps her to explore and be in control of what it might be like to feel scared through her play.

Tom, Ravi and Joshua are standing on a fallen log, pretending to be on a spaceship going to the moon. The play is based on a story that Tom had seen in a book. Tom says, “Okay everyone, get ready to lift off. 5, 4, 3 2, 1, blast off.” He is experimenting with counting backwards and being in charge. This kind of play helps children to develop mastery and control. The characteristics of effective learning are again evident as Tom applies his existing knowledge to his play.

Adults can support this play by singing countdown songs such as “Five currant buns” and “Five little speckled frogs”, and ensure that children have access to a selection of number books to enable counting backwards. No-one has suggested that Tom count backwards. It is his choice but the adults have provided books that they know that he can use.

Another example is the child trying to make a seesaw from blocks and struggling to find the point to balance the block on the cylinder. For some adults it can be incredibly difficult not to take over the play. Here the question is about providing the child with support and not taking over and doing it for them, as the child’s struggle is an important aspect of learning. How adults acknowledge and appreciate children’s efforts is fundamental.

Ongoing observations will inform adults about how challenging a child found a task. It is important that adults acknowledge this when

giving children praise. Simply telling a child, “Well done” after observing them persevering with challenge is unhelpful, whereas telling them that you noticed that they found something difficult or that you could see that they are trying, seeks to value the child’s efforts and helps them to bounce back from difficulties. This characteristic of effective learning is important because not only does it help children who are in the process of learning new skills have an understanding of what they are learning but it also allows them to persist when difficulties occur.

It is noteworthy that the children’s trajectory towards control and mastery does not automatically take place but is dependent upon the richness of experiences available to them and their own abilities. Here the environment and how the adult structures it, in response to what they have observed, is critical. Children’s play and explorations need to be supported by the provision. Children benefit when provided with opportunities to explore and share their thoughts, feelings and ideas, for example, through a variety of materials and experiences which include:

- ▶ water, sand, clay, nature
- ▶ construction with blocks, woodwork using real tools and recycled materials
- ▶ imaginative and role-play activities that reflect every day routines
- ▶ creative activities include; art, music, movement, dance, singing, modeling, building, making, placing and arranging, drawing, painting, writing, mathematics and design and technology.

The importance of first hand experience

Zosh et al (2017) provide further evidence that children learn in the first instance through first-hand experience. They suggest that self-initiated activities help children to develop a number of skills such as language and communication, symbolic representation, mathematics, scientific concepts, technology

and design, reading, writing and problem-solving skills. They show that adults have an essential role to play in supporting children to engage in making sense of the world around them. Think of all the things that you do with the children every day; it is within the context of such routines that children begin to make sense of their world. Is there enough time allowed for children to develop the characteristics of effective learning?

Anna needed to make a bag for the play that she was involved in. It had to be a specific kind of bag, one that she had seen in a shop when she was out shopping with her mum. Anna found some materials to make her bag to support her play. She sorted through different card sizes until she found two pieces the same size. She then cut a piece of card so that it was smaller. She tried to glue the cut piece of card onto the bigger piece. She glued the sides and the bottom and discussed with the adult why it was not working. The adult suggested that Anna think of another way to join the seams of her bag. After a while she decided to use the stapler. When the sides of her bag were securely fastened, she cut some string and stapled it on. She decided that the handle was not long enough, so she pulled it all off and cut a longer piece of string. Satisfied with her second attempt she went off with her handbag to resume her play.

Anna was clearly connecting with past first-hand experiences in ways that were meaningful to her. She was problem solving, evaluating and modifying her bag, concentrating and persevering. The importance of Anna's own personal intrinsic motivation cannot be over-emphasised, as it relates directly to her developing the characteristic of being mentally active (having ideas). Ultimately it involves children in learning because they want to learn, not simply because they are being taught. This means that the child is an active agent in his or her own development and learning. Children cannot be made to play (Bruce, 1996). Adults can help play, and thus the characteristics, by providing open-ended materials and resources in the form of workshops. This allows children to put their scientific skills to use by coming up with their own ideas and inventions. It is in this way that children not only reveal their ideas they also seek out challenges when they come across problems that they prefer to solve. The EPPE (2004) project found that in the most effective settings adults support and challenge children's thinking by getting involved in the thinking process with them.

Adults helping children to play

Adults can help children to play by ensuring that they feel safe enough to have a go and learn new things and take risks. This involves

adults making decisions about how much autonomy and how much support to give to the child, valuing what children can do and their ideas. I believe that this is one of the biggest challenges that adults face. Such observations tell us a great deal about how the characteristics of effective learning actually helps children to assert themselves and their need for independence and possessions. Adults can help children to manage conflict to such an extent that they think of others, thus supporting their developing relationships and negotiation skills.

Some children may not yet know how to play with others and will need help from adults. Children aged between 1 and 3 years old are often observed sitting together or nearby each other imitating actions and behaviours. Adults can use this side-by-side strategy to help children to join in play. By creating daily opportunities through role play scenarios children can play alongside others and develop their social skills. Adults must also help children who may struggle to play to be more sensitive to others. This is a fundamental aspect of learning to play, (Bruce, 1996). For example, Ravi says to Tom, "I don't want to be your friend". Adults can help Ravi by bringing in different role play scenarios where friends are not getting along, using props and animals. The adult might offer suggestions such as, "What might make Tom feel good or bad?" "How do you think it made Tom feel when you said that?" Or "what could you have done instead?" It is in this way that adults can help children to learn to see things from a different viewpoint and it allows them to practice situations through play before they happen.

Give children time to develop their ideas, for example, Simon spent 45 minutes making a house. He had made the frame and now wanted to make the roof. He selected his planks and put them across the frame until the floor was enclosed. He then got a tarpaulin and spent 25 minutes arranging it in position, trying many different ways, until it was where he wanted it to be. The adult announced that it was time to go inside. Simon asked the adult not to take down his house, as he wanted to play in it the next day. By protecting his play the adult allows it to develop.

What will you do with the children tomorrow?

Ultimately adults need to observe children at play and identify the first-hand experiences and fascinations that their play reveals. They need to think about how best to tap into what they have seen in order to inform planning and evaluation of what is available in the environment. Offer children as many first-hand experiences as possible. Ask yourself

how are children learning? Is it through first-hand experiences, games, representation or play?

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to encourage adults to observe, support and extend child-initiated play and learning. This is not easy when adults do not understand the importance of their own role in helping children to play. It can seem easier to observe a child's ability to count in an adult directed activity and tick it off on a checklist rather than questioning and reflecting upon why a child is repeatedly putting all of the bricks in the truck one at a time. It is in this way the child is making judgements about quantity and movement. They are choosing to add more bricks. This kind of play helps children to understand increases in quantity (adding and taking away). This exploratory play also helps to develop children's ability to judge differences in amounts and is the first step to developing the skill of counting. The characteristics of effective learning describe how children learn, whilst Bruce's network for learning provides details of the kind of learning that is happening.

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Pedagogical documentation: learning about learning

Debi Keyte-Hartland

In this article I write about the practice and process of pedagogical documentation that specifically comes out of the experience of the Northern Italian pre-schools and infant-toddler centres of Reggio Emilia. I begin with a description of what pedagogical documentation is and can be, then explore how it can be used as a process of daily professional development and adult learning before finally considering its uses with young children.

The process of pedagogical documentation, we could say, is to observe and listen closely to what young children say and do and to make that visible and thus sharable to others as visual documents that attest to the rich ways that children learn across subjects and modalities. We would use this information to learn about how children learn. We would begin, for example, to collect and write down the “dialogue”, both verbal and non-verbal, that has taken place between children, and children and educators and we would take photographs, perhaps some video, and also collect artefacts such as their drawings, paintings, models, etc. We would then use these collected traces to reflect upon and analyse, both by ourselves and in teams or in groups of educators, to interpret and find understanding of how children think and act. This would in turn help us as educators to make better choices of what to do next, and makes visible in the final process of publication of the documentation, the image of the child we hold and have discovered.

Pedagogical documentation makes visible the young child or children’s learning dispositions, their meaning-making, the things they value and their ways of seeing the world. In learning to make and read pedagogical documentation it helps us to expand our minds as to what is possible when we work with young children in the early years.

Pedagogical documentation for me has always offered an opportunity to share with other children, their families, other educators, the children’s stories of learning that can, through the action of sharing and discussion create multiple perspectives on the story or narrative being told. In this act of sharing and discussing the dominant discourses can be examined and challenged and it offers us a way of creating conditions for change to emerge. In Reggio Emilia, the process of pedagogical documentation - Observation - Documentation - Interpretation is a

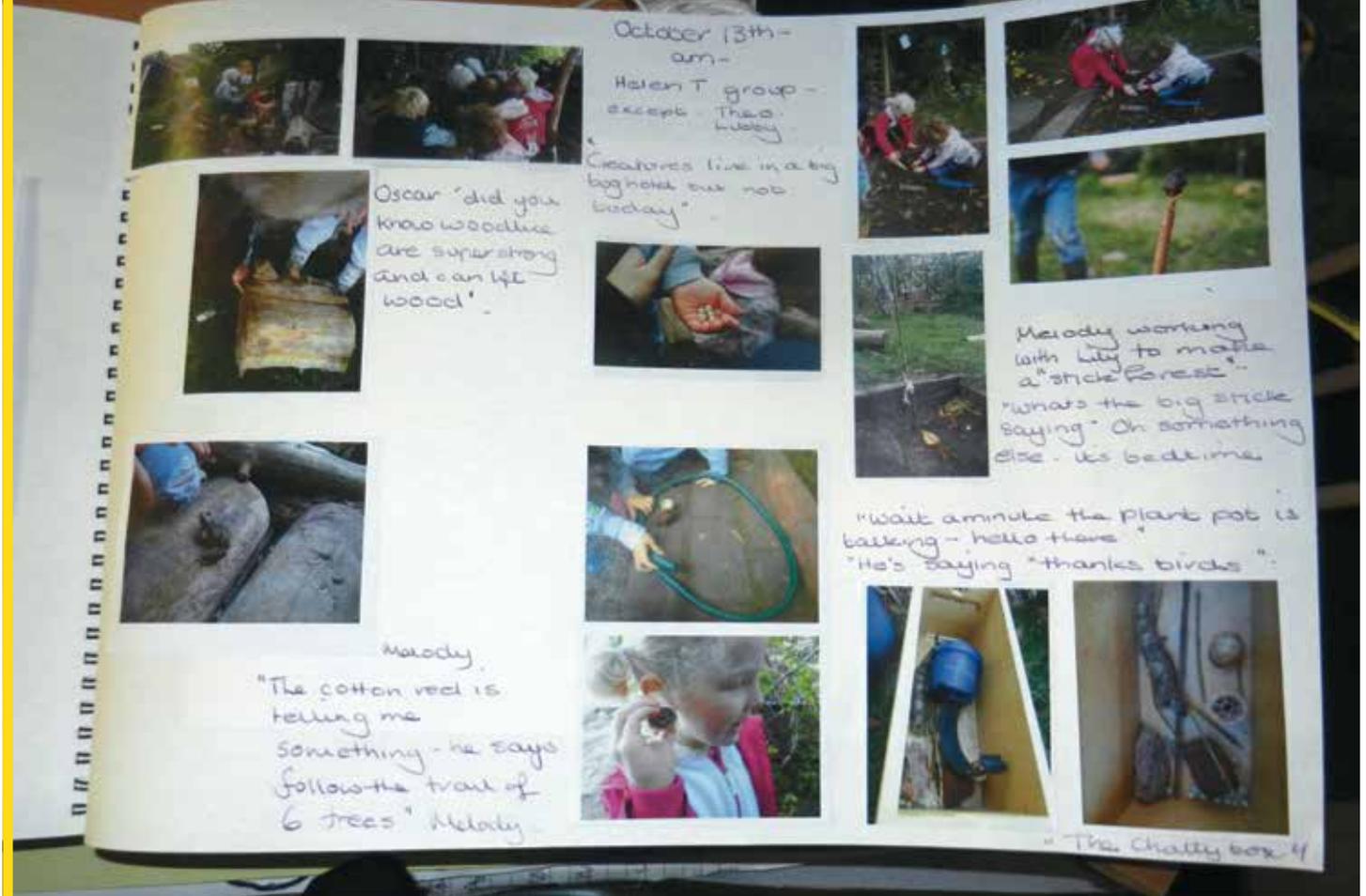
strong element of what they call “daily professional development”, as it is a way of researching how children learn and make meaning and the methods through which they express what they discover and find out about the world. The educators recognise that they are not looking for an ultimate truth as that can never be truly known, but by piecing the partial elements together a more complex picture with multiple ways of seeing and understanding can emerge.

Pedagogical documentation works on many levels:

- ▶ it is for planning what to do next with children
- ▶ it is for learning how children learn and think and
- ▶ it is for making visible to others, like families what the children are doing.

The observations created in the process of pedagogical documentation are shared and used in a way that helps us to learn about children. They are also used and shared with the children themselves to not only see themselves as learners, but to also engage in the research process themselves to enquire together as a learning group into something that is of interest to them through long term projects or evolving provocations. Pedagogical documentation leads to a transformation of thinking, it is a methodology for re-organising both thought and action. Importantly in the schools of Reggio Emilia they do not document fixed outcomes, but instead concentrate on generative processes of learning in action instead.

One of the many things that I do in my work with educators and children in the early years is to sit with educators and their traces of documentation (the raw dialogue that is recorded, the photographic sequences, and the videos) and help them to piece together the bigger picture, of what we think children are thinking about. I might have a point of view that comes from my artistic and aesthetic training and outlook, they may have a different point of view to mine based on what they know about the children themselves. So together, with our differing perspectives we are always trying to go beyond the superficial of what we think is seen, to a richer place of meaning-making for ourselves about what is going on, ie the meaning behind the doing. This process of interpreting the traces of pedagogical documentation awakens in us the pleasure of seeing children in more complex ways as



we begin to notice their strategies for learning, and the patterns of their imagination. In doing so it transforms our thinking about what children are capable of.

Loris Malaguzzi, the founding teacher and inspirational leader behind the pre-schools of Reggio Emilia, often talked about the importance of standing aside for a while and listening to what children were doing and saying; listening carefully in order to reflect on the experiences of the children themselves.

I think what he also meant was that in doing so, a change would occur in us, where we would see children and their strong capabilities for deep thought and action that would radically change our position, our role, and our way of being with children in the process of teaching. This is what the practice of pedagogical documentation can do in transforming our thinking about how children are in the world and our place beside them as educators.

I think there are also some very clear links between the purpose and practice of pedagogical documentation and children's personal, social and emotional development when using it direct with children. The action of pedagogical documentation often begins with the lifting of a pen to write or a camera to take a photograph. In doing so you are showing that you are visibly listening, that you are valuing what that child or group of children are doing. You are demonstrating and practising what Carla Rinaldi (2006:65) calls the pedagogy of listening. As a child you know that you are being noticed, listened to and thought about.

stimulates emotions... Listening [is] welcoming and being open to differences, recognising the value of the others point of view and interpretation. (ibid)

I first thought about this when I was in Reggio Emilia for the first time nearly 18 years ago and was confronted with some A3-sized photographs of the faces of their youngest children in an infant-toddler centre. They were just simple black and white photographs of each of the children in that classroom, all presented just above floor level where the children tended to gather. I saw how the babies would crawl across the floor and find themselves and each other, often in pairs or in small groups. These often emotional encounters with the portraits resulted in much awe and wonder, sometimes giggling and pointing, at other times contemplative and thoughtful as hands on printed faces then found their own and each others eyes, noses and mouths. It was a form of pedagogical documentation that created a context for the encounter of self and of each other. These encounters with the documentation were then re-interpreted through another layer of documentation by the adult as they listened with curiosity to how the children recognised themselves and each other. It was a powerful and emotional engagement and I realised just what a positive experience this was for the children. Over time, as these photographs remained and the children got to know each other more they would point to each other as if saying, "that's you and that is me, we are together." It created a positive context for togetherness and it was it seemed, the genesis of collaboration. Carla Rinaldi, again often speaks of the process of documentation as an act of caring, and an act of interaction and an act of love.

Behind the act of listening there is often a curiosity, a desire, a doubt, an interest, there is always an emotion. Listening is emotion; it is generated by emotions and

The simplest thing that we can do to engage with children in our pedagogical documentation of them, is to turn the camera or the tablet around and engage with children with

what we are doing. So often, observations mean that the educator is busy writing and not interacting, or is hidden behind the lens of a camera or face down in a tablet. This is not what we want to do. But by turning the camera around we can use it like a visual notebook. We can share with the child or group of children what we ourselves are valuing, and the older children we work with will always have something to say about it! It is often a way to engage together either in conversation or non-verbal interaction about what they are trying to understand, what they are making sense of and what they are doing in relation to others. This interaction may then lead to writing down more of what they say. We can say things like, "That is really important, I'm going to write it down." Again it tells the child that what they have to say or what they have done is interesting and of value to us.

A great example of this way of working happens at Madeley Nursery School in Telford. They use large A3 sized reflective journals to collect traces of the children's experiences. Inside they lay photographs side by side with what children say and do, often together with the questions and thoughts that arise for them as educators. The children are fascinated with these books, and refer back to them often as a point of recall and for building upon their own ideas. The educator uses the journal not only to reflect back with children on what they have said and been doing but also uses it to find common threads of experience, tracing back ideas to when they first emerged as seeds of possibility. The journals connect experiences over time and enable children to see themselves as a part of a group, a community of learners thus helping to create the conditions for building a sense of belonging, by seeing themselves in connection with others.

In starting out in pedagogical documentation I would always start small and take tiny steps so as not to feel overwhelmed. I would buy a large notebook with blank pages in so that I could write and draw in it. Sometimes I like to draw how the children are drawing, copying the types of marks they are making in a sequence so that I can learn about how a drawing begins and ends. I might sit with a group of children and listen to their conversation whilst they are playing and take written notes on what I find interesting or have questions about. I would certainly take some photographs or maybe short snippets of film that I could look back at later. I would stick the photographs in the book, nothing fancy like a scrapbook, but just an ordered set of written and visual notation. And then I'd find someone who could talk to me about it, maybe in a reflection or planning meeting. I'd like to find out what other people thought about what was going on and see if it matched with my own thoughts, or if indeed the discussion offered new perspectives that were unexpected and different from what I had assumed. That often happens with me and it is an exciting way to learn about how children learn.

Alternatively I'd use film as my modality of collecting pedagogical traces of documentation. I'd take short snippets of film of no more than 5 minutes and use these in a staff meeting to share and find out from others

what they think is going on and what questions it raises for them. It is surprising when you do this, as suddenly you start making connections, seeing familiar patterns of thoughts or play across different contexts. You get to know the child or group of children even better. Then I would use the film or the notes to think about what to offer next. It might be more of the same, it might be a challenge or a provocation for thinking about something differently or for a context to be devised so that the children can discover and find out about something that I think is of interest to them. But always, I would use it back with the children themselves. They not only like to see themselves on film but have a right to view what we record of them and it gives rise to useful information that you and they can use in your thinking of what to do next together. There are occasions of course where children might not want to be or cannot be recorded, filmed or photographed and this too has to be taken into consideration in the ethics of your encounter with pedagogical documentation as it would with any other form of observation.

I might then, over time, gather together these traces of pedagogical documentation to re-tell a story of what has happened, connecting ideas about what the children are doing together with my own and colleagues' interpretation of what we think the meaning of the children's action is about. This is what I call summative or published documentation.

At the heart of the process of pedagogical documentation and its subsequent sharing and publication to others (including children and their families) is that it values relationships, listening, caring, meaning-making, connection, belonging and interaction. These are essential elements and outcomes of an education process that is researchful in its approaches to teaching and learning where the co-construction of knowledge and the expression of what they know is at the forefront of the human experience of learning and knowing.

Pedagogical documentation we could then say is a research approach to children's learning, and about making that learning visible for analysis, for acting upon and deciding what to do next. The final stage is the publication of summative documentation that makes visible the co-research of the adults and the children. Pedagogical documentation cannot happen without the pedagogy of listening and does not really occur when we single out children from working with each other. It forms in the relationship and interaction of others; other children, other educators, other families and the community. It reveals and tells the story of meaning-making and understanding in co-constructed and sociable contexts where children are the protagonists of their own learning.

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Noticing, recognising, responding and reflecting: the process of observing infants and young children.

Julia Manning-Morton

The New Zealand early years practice guide, *Kei Tua o te Pae/Assessment for Learning*, identifies assessment as a three part process: “noticing, recognising and responding” (NZ Ministry of Education, 2004). Each of these elements are essential to the act of observing infants and young children, particularly “noticing” and “recognising”, without which “responding” will be mismatched to children’s interests and concerns. The practice guide describes these three elements as “progressive filters” (ibid), through which the early years practitioner processes their observations. Firstly by what they notice, secondly as they apply their professional knowledge to recognise and interpret what they have seen and thirdly as they make decisions about how to respond. So we have to ask ourselves, “What do we notice and why?”, “How do we recognise it?” and “Why do we respond in a particular way to a particular observation?” It is important to think about the possible impact of what we filter in and out of our observations and to recognise the personal and professional influences on those filters. By doing so, reflexivity becomes the important fourth element, which is woven throughout the observation process.

Noticing

When asked about what and when they observe, practitioners often reply “everything” and “all the time!” but usually, observation is only recognised as a professional practice once the observation is recorded in some way. Clearly recording observations is hugely important but we also need to consider the importance of our everyday noticing. Noticing is not just about absorbing information at a superficial level, noticing in effective practice is about:

- ▶ perception; how we use all our senses to notice
- ▶ attention - what we focus on, and
- ▶ attunement - how we tune-in and empathise.

Stern describes “affect attunement” (1998) as the process whereby an adult sensitively reads the emotional signals of an infant and then mirrors the child’s inner state with their behaviours and vocalisations. The infant then “reads” this response as something that reflects their feelings and thereby feels “felt” and understood. When these interactions are synchronised, they deepen bonds between the child and the adult and expand the baby’s curiosity and interest in the world (Siegel 1999). Being tuned-in at this emotional level then, is an important contribution to a child’s positive dispositions to learning and indicates that noticing includes much more than seeing with our eyes or hearing with our ears. To really notice we have to be prepared to look below the surface and actively think about what might be the basis of what we see and hear. We also have to be prepared to recognise our own emotional responses to what we notice as, by “listening” with our feelings, we can tune in to children’s emotions, empathise more and sensitively anticipate how a child might feel in a certain situation (Manning-Morton and Thorp, 2015).

This kind of emotional reflection is central to the “Infant Observation Technique” (Miller et al, 1989) developed for the training of psychotherapy students. In this technique the observer not only records what they see but also includes any feelings they experienced during the observation. This foregrounds the emotional “temperature” of the environment that the child is experiencing. The observation is then explored in a discussion group, which helps the observer to understand not only what they have seen but also any feelings raised. This kind of supportive supervision, where the emotional dimensions of practice can

be thought through, is also essential to early years practitioners (Elfer and Dearnly, 2007).

The process of observing infants and young children in such an emotionally open way can often feel overwhelming because it can arouse our own baby-like feelings.

Where these feelings are difficult to think about, we often defend ourselves psychologically by denying or avoiding them (Manning-Morton in Pound and Miller, 2011). This can result in practitioners not noticing things that disturb them emotionally such as where a child is sad and withdrawn or displays signals of abuse or neglect. The potentially harmful impact on the child of not noticing, recognising and responding in such a situation is clear, which is why practitioners need the time and space to reflect on each child and their experience.



Other more practical issues may also get in the way of effective noticing; practitioners can be distracted by the range of administrative tasks they have to undertake, sometimes including, ironically, the observation notes they have to complete. The pressure to record an observation may sometimes lead to a rush to grab the post-it notes or the camera and result in losing not only the potential positive engagement with the child but also the opportunity to notice the detail of the child’s activity. In contrast, in the “Infant Observation Technique” (Miller et al, 1989) the observer does not take any notes during their visit, instead they are simply there, taking in everything that they see. Then, as soon as possible afterwards, the observer writes up the observation. It might be thought that important detail is lost by not recording the observation simultaneously, but this technique, in fact,



provides a wealth of detail about the child and their experience because the observer can notice every small example of a look, an expression or interaction without the pen/paper/ipad getting in the way.

Noticing a high level of detail of a child's verbal and non-verbal communications and actions is important for all child observations but it is crucial for babies and toddlers whose development is so rapid, whose spoken language is still developing and whose advances in play and learning can be very subtle.

Recognising

From amongst the huge amount of interesting things that a practitioner notices about their key children every day, they have to decide what to recognise as significant enough to record. As Mary-Jane Drummond says:

The act of seeing gives way to understanding; the process of collecting evidence is followed by attempts to make the evidence meaningful. (1993:70)

So it is at this stage that another filter is applied to the observation process. This time it is the application of professional knowledge and experience to what has been noticed (NZ Ministry of Education, 2004). Clearly, to be able to do this effectively, the early years practitioner needs to have a thorough knowledge of a range of different theoretical perspectives on how infants

and young children play, develop and learn. Where such knowledge is lacking, significant developments will be missed and observations will be superficial or confined to checklists of developmental milestones or learning outcomes set out in a framework for the practitioner to follow.

Such documents can be useful to knowledgeable and experienced practitioners as an aide-memoir but alone cannot hope to cover the depth, breadth and nuances of child development theory and so, in themselves can act as a filter of what does or doesn't get observed. In addition, in the absence of higher level professional training, such checklists can be misunderstood and misused. They can, for example, result in practitioners taking a deficit view of children's development; focusing only on what they cannot do, which can have a particularly negative impact on children with additional needs and disabilities. Also, because checklists cannot include sufficient detail and range, they cannot give the kind of holistic view of a child that is necessary for really understanding their uniqueness.

Having an in-depth understanding of each child observed is another requirement for effectively recognising what is significant; we have to pay attention to what is most meaningful for **this** child. We need to recognise each individual child's interests, strengths and dispositions; their friendships and relationships; their joys and concerns and who they are. Each of these, of course,

will vary between children according to their age, their individual developmental pattern and their socio-cultural context. To be able to effectively notice and recognise, then, requires a commitment to building close Key Person relationships with children and families in early years settings. It is in such relationships that practitioners can really come to know each individual child; knowledge that starts with and always relies upon communicative partnerships with each child's parent(s)/carer(s) (Elfer et al, 2011).

Such communicative partnerships will ensure that practitioners' understanding of families is more secure and therefore that the contexts of their observations are sound. Practitioners need to remind themselves not to make assumptions about a child's experience growing up in a particular kind of family, especially when that family's socio-cultural background is different or unfamiliar to them. A practitioner's personal discomfort with, or lack of knowledge about, a particular family can result in a child's learning being overlooked, their contribution being undervalued or their behaviours being misunderstood. As humans, we find it hard to notice things that are unfamiliar and that we haven't learned to think about; we tend to notice things we have seen before and we also distort what we see to fit our existing knowledge (Lowenfeld, 1935, cited in Drummond, 1993). So, as with noticing, recognising also requires a good level of self-awareness on the part of the practitioner, who must be aware of any lack of knowledge

they may have and then seek out information to develop their learning further, in order to reduce the impact of any personal prejudices or biases.

Professional reflection is also helpful in addressing any anxieties that arise in the practitioner from the process and content of observation. When so many instances of children's play, development and learning are observed every day, deciding on what is meaningful may feel overwhelming. We become aware that we have a huge responsibility in how we are representing each child. We may also feel disturbed by what we have observed or uncertain about possible interpretations and therefore how to respond. It might be thought that such anxieties are a weakness of only less well-qualified or inexperienced practitioners but in fact, being able to recognise and bear the disequilibrium of uncertainty is a mark of maturity and professionalism:

...to be a good observer... requires a space in the mind where thoughts can begin to take shape and where confused experiences can be held in an inchoate form until their meaning becomes clearer. This kind of mental functioning requires a capacity to tolerate anxiety, uncertainty, discomfort, helplessness, a sense of bombardment. (Rustin in Miller et al, 1989:20-21)

So, being prepared not to know and be uncertain for a little while can be a strength not a weakness; it can show a commitment to thinking about the complexities of children's learning, to being open to learning from our observations of children and therefore to being flexible enough to think differently and maybe change our minds (Drummond, 1993). Observation is a reciprocal process in which we don't only learn about children, we also learn about ourselves.

Responding

As with noticing, responding is something practitioners do all the time; in the moment as they join a child in their excitement at seeing a frog in the garden, for example, or over time as they then introduce play opportunities that support the child's interest in and understanding of frogs. However, as with noticing, responding may be more highly valued when it is written down in a

curriculum plan, yet it is how we respond in the moment that will sustain or undermine that child's immediate interest. It is important to develop a daily cycle of observing and planning in an emergent curriculum where the time gap between noticing and recognising is reduced so that responding is more immediate and meaningful to the children. This requires constant communication between practitioners and focused time to reflect on how to respond to and build on each child's interests.

By regularly reviewing their responses, practitioners can notice whether they are responding equitably to different children's fascinations and preoccupations and to reflect on why they may respond to some interests and activities positively and others negatively. Like the filters that impact on noticing and recognising, the filters that impact on responding arise from both professional knowledge and personal values. We all have areas that we are more interested in or know about such as music more than clay modelling or the planets more than sea creatures but it is the practitioner's job to model a spirit of interest and inquiry whatever the topic.



More difficult perhaps is ensuring a professional response to activities that we find unpleasant or disturbing. We need to think about how our personal feelings and values may mean that we only respond to those areas of learning of which we approve or value more highly, thereby potentially ignoring aspects which may be important to a particular child. We must be prepared to see the messy or difficult (for us) aspects of play, development and learning such as gun play or exploring bodily products like mucus, as well as the more generally accepted aspects of play and learning.

Examining the filters through which we process our observations of children suggests a level of personal reflection that may be unusual but observational evidence is **always** mediated through our subjective experiences as well as interpreted through our more objective professional knowledge. We are always participant observers to an extent so rather than strive for a false objectivity, we need to use the information we can gather through taking a child's perspective and thinking about our

responses to help us work in a constructive way to better understand the child's experience. In this perspective observation is not a tool to just measure children but to understand and learn about and from them.

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The pirates! Using observation to support English as an additional language (EAL) through imaginative play

Anni McTavish

Royston Nursery in Glasgow has a high percentage of children with English as an additional language (EAL). They have seen an increase from 30% to 60% of children with EAL attending the setting over the last two years. With a minimum of 27 languages, including: Polish, Mandarin, Kurdish, Tigrinya, Cantonese, Arabic and Amharic, only a few of the children share a common language. Nurturing close, supportive relationships and developing communication and language is therefore a high priority.

Head of Nursery, Donna Murphy explains:

The environment and ethos we create is central to ensuring that every child is included and their contributions valued. Fundamental to this are staff's observations of children's play and learning. Recognising children's ideas and experiences allows us to support and embed communication and language across all areas of the curriculum.

Celebrating Froebel's principle of "beginning where the learner is", Child Development Officer Angela McInnes has been observing the children's play. "This has helped me to see what the children can do, what they are interested in and to think about how I might help them to learn further." Following the EAL teacher, Patricia Grimes' suggestions, she has been using a variety of strategies to support communication and language. Her observations also provide clues as to how the children might be feeling and the "mood" during play. Understandably, language acquisition will be improved when they are settled, relaxed and happy.

We have a set of large, wooden scales in the nursery. I noticed that Felip was exploring these, and had discovered that he could slide objects along the slope at the top. Although this wasn't the "right way" to use them, he had invented another, creative way to play with them and was really enjoying the game he'd created. I found myself simply describing: "you're sliding your car from the top to the bottom..... it's in the bucket! Oh! How did it get there?" I felt that giving him plenty of time to do this over and over again was important.



Discussing these observations with the EAL teacher helped me to see that this extra time had given me the chance to repeat the same words and phrases. Felip was readily repeating words, and trying to explain to me in Polish what was happening. He was very motivated to use all his language resources. I will continue to use this strategy to support other children's experiences. I also plan to use the scales again, perhaps in the garden and show the children how they might use them with some different objects to balance the buckets.

For Felip, this was a meaningful interaction, with the adult supporting and extending his communication alongside his chosen activity. This links to Krashen's "additional language theory", where the emphasis is on "natural language acquisition and comprehensible input, plus one" (1982). This means that the learner needs to hear the language in context, and that it must be understandable and take the learning a small step higher.

Krashen's theory mirrors Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, which describes the gap between what a learner can do alone, and what they can do with the support of someone more skilled or experienced (either another child or an adult). In his play, Felip works at the edge of his capability and Angela supports his **potential** development (Bruce, 2005:43).

What does high quality observational practice involve?

Moylett (2018) writes "The first and most important thing that adults can do is to be fascinated by how children learn." As the short example above illustrates, this would seem to be an excellent starting point for high quality observational practice. Other skills that will contribute to this include:

- ▶ **tuning-in** - to what the child might be exploring, playing or thinking
- ▶ **noticing** - what has caught a child's attention, involved or engaged them?
- ▶ **being attentive** - staying in contact and in the present
- ▶ **being curious** - about what might be going on for the child/group
- ▶ **asking questions** (of oneself) - such as "how or what could I do to support or add to this play and learning?"
- ▶ **being quiet** - limiting questions, watching, providing appropriate language as needed, and/or some comments.

Sharing our thoughts and ideas about our observations of children's play and learning can be both illuminating and satisfying. Of course, how we see and interpret observations of children's play will vary from practitioner to practitioner. This will depend on our own expectations, experiences and views. It also depends on how well we know the children, their experiences, current understanding and interests. Having a clear purpose for our observations helps us to



focus in on a child's particular needs, as well as providing valuable information about their dispositions to learn.

Identifying characteristics (or a need to support these), such as self-confidence, persistence and a willingness to "have a go", means that we can then be on the look-out to sustain these further. It can also be a useful exercise to film or record our interactions, and note how well we might be doing on some of the points listed above.

Good observational practice means that practitioners will be **regularly** observing children. This will include both **participative observation** (informal observations of children's play and learning whilst also being directly involved) and **non-participative observation** (observing from the sidelines, watching, noticing what children are doing, without being directly involved). Both are valuable, and allow us to gather different information at different times. Stepping back can help us to see children's independent progress or struggles. Observing whilst being involved can help us spot significant moments, or fine details in a child's thinking. In her summary of children's imaginative play below, Child Development Officer Angela McInnes has employed both.

Observing and planning for imaginative play

Many of our group are into the theme of pirates, with these interests coming in from home. I've been trying out different ideas, particularly outdoors, to support this. The first thing I did was set up a role-play space as a "pretend" pirate ship. We made a ship's wheel out of cardboard, and we added fabrics and scarves for dressing up. I've now added shells and a sand-tray full of coins for treasure, plus a treasure chest (a cardboard box)! The boys have really enjoyed "walking the plank" and some have found sticks for pretend swords.

I've been able to step back and watch the children's play, and noticed that many of our EAL children are beginning to use words and short phrases that we've been working on. For example, they point to things and shout "Look!" Sometimes they do this because they want me to see something, but sometimes it's a way of asking for help, ie with an argument or conflict over resources.

I also enjoy joining in and supporting the children to find positive ways to play together. I want to encourage them all to take part if they want to. For instance, today I brought in some real seaweed! This was very exciting and I tried to put a lot of expression into my words to get the children involved. They were fascinated, and wanted to touch and smell it! We did lots of guessing about what it might be and where it came from. This has added new vocabulary to the play.

Patricia, my EAL teacher, introduced me to a great story book, the "Port Side Pirates" (2011 Barefoot Books), which I've been reading a lot. It has movement, music and repetition and the children really enjoy this. I've also used the accompanying YouTube video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6y7o3efB66g> accessed April 2018), which means the children hear the story in a different way, and we all sing along together.

I've tried to keep a balance between noticing how the children are playing and using language, and then getting involved and supporting it. Chatting things over with my EAL teacher has been really helpful. I knew the children loved water, so the next

thing we did was to make "cannon-balls" with water balloons. I think because the play has been so exciting, it has really encouraged the children to play well together and have a go at language. I also took our large wooden scales outside, so the children could weigh their "cannon-balls". They have now discovered that they can throw these as they walk the plank, and try to guess how far they will go!

Following on from the play

Patricia Grimes, EAL teacher follows up Angela's observations of the children's play and initiates some large scale mark-making, using felt-tips and a big roll of paper spread out on the floor. This provides plenty of unhurried time for the children to share their ideas, and allows her to model ways to support language and thinking.



The play continues to develop with the addition of a metal detector, so they can hunt for coins, and, a few days later, Angela brings in a real fish to explore. At snack time, she asks the children to help her work out a problem, how to make equal "ships rations". "We've got two bananas. I've cut them into four, but we have ten pirates! How can we make it work so everyone gets a piece?"

The pedagogy behind the practice

Careful observation and sensitive planning for children's interests can result in rich imaginative play. The experiences described facilitate plenty of opportunities to practice and develop communication and language, as well as other areas of learning.

The practitioner's attitude - friendly, inviting, fun, curious and patient - signals to the

children that they can relax and enjoy the play. This is hugely important in supporting the acquisition of additional languages. The children are encouraged to play with other children who are confident English speakers. The practitioner, as well as more formally observing and assessing the children's progress, also responds moment to moment to what she sees. She joins-in with the play, models and recasts language, and supplies extra resources or materials or a new experience when the time is right.

There are no demands to speak before the children are ready, yet the play is intellectually challenging, leading to deep engagement. Questions are kept to a minimum, are open-ended and directed to the whole group. The last thing any of the children need is to be put on the spot, or pressurised to come up with a "right answer".

Their self-confidence and self-esteem grows, which in turns supports their participation. This encourages them to communicate and to try out their new vocabulary.

Many of the children are in the "silent period" of language acquisition. Although they are not engaging verbally, this is still a very active period in the acquisition of English, ie they are constantly listening and processing language. They understand a lot, but need the opportunity to hear words and phrases spoken in the right context over and over again, and to practice having a go themselves.

Regular, small song and rhyme group times provide the children with lots of opportunities to hear the sounds and structure of English. Slowing the pace and keeping these experiences short and fun is essential.

Throughout, the practitioner carefully builds on the children's experiences, but is sensitive not to ask them to take too big a leap in their understanding. For example, she introduces the idea of seaweed and cannon-balls,

familiar to the children through the books and stories that the setting has gathered to enhance the play. It is only later that she introduces the idea to weigh the cannon balls using the large scales. This links to McVicker Hunt's theory of "Match" (in Smidt 2007:28), where something new is introduced, but care is taken not to add anything that makes too big a stretch between the current learning and the new. In the opposite way, too small a stretch would lack a cognitive challenge.



Head of Nursery Donna Murphy reflects:

Engagement with families is crucial. With our EAL teacher's support, we encourage our families to continue to use and develop their home languages, and to share these in the setting. This is vital to the success of developing a second language.

Drury (2007) acknowledges the importance of this, and highlights the value of a "multi-method" approach to multi-lingual learning. It is essential to observe and understand the "100 languages" (Malaguzzi, 1996) through which young children express meaning. This includes non-verbal communication, gestures, mark-making, singing, painting, playing etc. Good practice in supporting children with EAL is good practice for all.

This article has been adapted from a case study in Anni McTavish's new book *Expressive Arts and Design in the Early Years: Supporting young children's creativity through art, design, music, dance and imaginative play* forthcoming, Routledge 2018.

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Resources

- Creative singing and chanting with young EAL learners <https://bit.ly/2lzjvic>
- International songs and cultural resource website www.mamalisa.com
- "Language of the month" resources from Newbury Park School <https://bit.ly/2r07iHt>
- Supporting Children Learning English as an Additional Language Primary National Strategies <https://bit.ly/2GDdIHl>

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